

**Reading the Word with the Heart:  
Luther's *Large Catechism* and the Practice of Faith**

**A Professional Project  
presented to  
the Faculty of the  
Claremont School of Theology**

**In Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry**

**by  
Margaret V. Schultz-Akerson  
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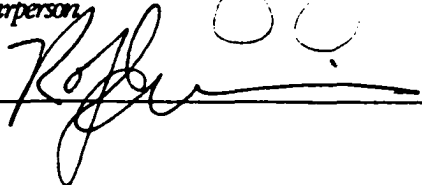
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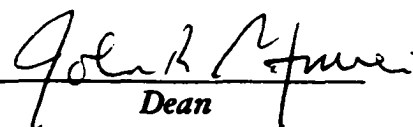
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## ABSTRACT

### Reading the Word with the Heart: Luther's *Large Catechism* and the Practice of Faith

by

Margaret V. Schultz-Akerson

Luther scholarship and Lutheran self-understanding have traditionally focused more on doctrine than on the practice of responding to God's gracious actions, perhaps due to fear of works-righteousness. This project grew out of the assumption that identifying how historic figures, such as Martin Luther, practiced grace-centered faith, and taught others to do so, might offer modern-day disciples insight and concrete examples of how to strengthen their own practice of faith. Recognizing Luther's *Large Catechism* as an under-utilized resource for the practice of faith, this project undertook to assess its potential as a contribution to the ecumenical field of spirituality. Limited to the Ten Commandments, the research involved reflection on Luther's explanations to the latter nine commandments in light of a proper observance of the First Commandment. Conclusions drawn from journal and graphed responses recommend the development of a resource that facilitates reflection on Luther's original writing rather than on excerpt summaries of his work, and that guides participants past what is archaic and off-putting in the *Large Catechism* to what continues to offer nourishment today. A review of the Theologia Germanica and an overview of literature on spiritual reading are included. An annotated outline for an adult series entitled "Luther's *Large Catechism*: Reading the Word with the Heart Today" is offered.

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**I dedicate this project to the three men in my life who cheer me on and love me daily:**

**Micah, whose tenor tunes from the shower keep me smiling.**

**Marty, who calls home and blesses me to still be mom.**

**Reg, whose partnership is, as Hopkins puts it, “long and lovely and lush.”**

**All pearls of great price.**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Grace and Diligence in the Practice of Faith: A Personal Story

When I was ordained into the Word and Sacrament Ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, one of the most meaningful moments for me was when Bishop Stan Olson addressed me with the following questions: “Will you be diligent in your study of the Holy Scriptures and in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God’s people, nourish them with the Word and Sacraments, and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?”<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the necessity of God’s help, I responded gladly, “I will, and I ask God to help me.” I was grateful that the ordination service assumed and asserted that diligence to this commitment to regular spiritual practice was not dependent on my efforts, but was understood as under-girded and made possible by God’s expected help.

The ordination service continued with an additional question by the Bishop, this time directed to the congregation. Bishop Olson asked the gathered community, “Will you pray for her, help and honor her for her work’s sake, and in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ?” The congregation’s strong response, “We will,” blessed me. I was experienced enough in ministry to know I would need their prayers, help, and honor, and I received their intentions with trust and gratitude. This concluding question and response directed to the congregation

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<sup>1</sup> *Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 194.

was freeing because it took the focus off of me and put it on “us.” With this question directed to the community, the ordination rite witnesses to the recognition that diligence in faith, made possible by God’s help, necessarily involves the sustaining partnership of human support and accountability. Pastors are not independent islands unto themselves. Similar questions addressed to the gathered community are asked in the Service of Installation of a Lay Professional Leader, the Service of Recognition of Ministries in the Congregation, and the Service of Affirmation of the Vocation of Christians in the World.<sup>2</sup> This call to diligence accompanied by the recognition of the need for God’s help and the community’s partnership is not reserved for clergy alone, but is directed to all Christians, reflecting Luther’s teaching on the priesthood of all believers.

A personal story related to this call for diligence and mutual accountability in the practice of faith underlies the choice of topic for this paper. A number of years ago while having my hair cut by one who had occasionally attended our congregation for worship, the cosmetologist looked over my hair and commented that I ought to attend to my hair more *diligently*. What particularly caught my attention was his use of the word *diligent*. It drew my mind back immediately to the questions in the service of ordination that had meant so much to me. He explained that getting my hair cut only every six months was not adequate for my hair’s optimal care. I acknowledged my failure to be diligent in this matter, but as I acknowledged that failure I wondered who has ever been as bold in holding me similarly accountable for

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 136-49.

diligence in my prayer life. I pray on a regular basis rather than just every six months, but if I did not, would anyone call me to task for my neglect? I then reflected on the roadblocks to my graciously holding my cosmetologist accountable for being diligent in caring for himself spiritually. With his attention focused almost exclusively on financial matters and the development of his booming career, he appeared to have abandoned or at least neglected any practice of companionship or guidance related to spiritual seeking. John Mogabgab, editor of *Weavings: A Journal for the Christian Spiritual Life* articulated my concern when he wrote, “. . . [T]o be fruitful, our spiritual seeking must at some point cease to be merely individual and become instead a journey shared.”<sup>3</sup> It seemed apparent that the choices my cosmetologist was making were less than adequate for his soul’s optimal care. I knew also that he would be defensive if his failure was as unabashedly pointed out as my failure had been. I had encouraged him over the years to participate more fully in some expression of “a journey shared,” but at that time he didn’t seem to grasp the value of being held within the spiritual accountability of a faith community.

A while later I received a new call, so I was no longer a pastor in the community in which the cosmetologist was a member. Therefore I was surprised when I received a letter from him and doubly surprised to discover that the letter had been sent from prison. He had been incarcerated on embezzlement charges. He wrote that in retrospect he recognized his need for something deeper than his

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<sup>3</sup> John Mogabgab, “Along the Desert Road: Notes on Spiritual Reading,” in *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. E. Glenn Hinson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993,) 181.

booming career. He knew he was forgiven, but he acknowledged also that as a baptized Christian he was accountable for living as a Christian in the world. How was he to do that? Where could he find help?

In his encounter with brokenness and disappointment, theological questions that we all must face emerged. How do diligence and grace dance together? Can we who cling to the promise of salvation by grace through faith still be held accountable for diligence in faithful living? If so, why, how, and to whom? Is diligence our work or God's work, or is it simultaneously God's work and ours? Or, is the unspoken assumption that since we are saved by grace we are off the hook and any effort to hold us accountable risks becoming works-righteousness?

Following these theological questions practical ones emerged. How does the community of faith hear, understand, and live out the call to mutual accountability with and for each other? Is there concrete help available within the Lutheran tradition of grace-centered faith that usefully focuses on the meaning of the Decalogue for daily life? The Sixth Commandment "You shall not steal," had implications for the particular situation facing my cosmetologist. Likewise relevant were the Ninth and Tenth Commandments: "You shall not covet" what belongs to your neighbor. In addition, clearly the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," underlies all that was going on in this difficult turn of events.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Exod. 20:15, 17. All scripture passages are from the New Revised Standard Version.

There is a difference, however, between knowing the commandments as laws and attuning our hearts to receive the freedom and grace they offer for daily life. The concern for Luther is not how the commandments restrict, but how they free us to live in response to God, self, and neighbor. For Luther the commandments were not so much a matter of law, but a matter of orientation toward God's initiating goodness. It is God who saves, not our observance of the commandments. An orientation toward observing them, however, points to whether or not we are trusting God to save us or something else. This pastoral concern is evidenced by Luther's strong focus in the *Large Catechism* on the First Commandment's attention to what it means to trust God above all else.

This question, where one places one's ultimate trust, seemed at the heart of my former parishioner's crisis as he reflected on what led up to his incarceration. And I knew he was not alone in his crisis. Who or what we trust in above all else is a matter of identity. For Christians, our identity is found in our baptism into Jesus Christ: an identity each one of us betrays—not just those who are incarcerated. Timothy Lull, President of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, reminded pastors of this a few years ago as we gathered for a continuing education event. Lull asserted that “each of us daily betrays our baptismal identity and needs to go to bed confessing our sins, but just as surely, we need to be called forth in the morning to newness of life.” This is easy to affirm, but how do we hold each other accountable to this baptismal calling?

### The Witness of Practice from Historical Sources

It is widely accepted that today's mainline spiritual traditions have not developed in a vacuum. Instead they have grown out of seeds planted by earlier disciples. It is our task to care for the plants that have grown from these spiritual seeds. We weed and we prune as we seek to be ever-reforming disciples today. In traceable ways, these traditions can be identified with patterns and tendencies, good and bad, of those who have gone before them. For instance, the Methodist tradition knows the particular influence of John Wesley; the Presbyterian tradition, John Calvin; Lutherans, Martin Luther; Catholics, Augustine, Benedict, Therese, Claire, Francis, and numerous others. In tracing back to these forerunners we do well to not limit attention to the doctrine, history, or theology they espoused, but to also include concern for the unique ways they lived out or practiced their theology and faith. It is one thing to know what they taught about prayer and theology. It is another thing to know how they themselves prayed and practiced their faith, and how they taught others to pray and practice theirs. The witness of historical practice has a contribution to make to those seeking insights into lived discipleship today, as does the articulation of historical thought.

In the contemporary church's effort to offer itself as a source and center for life and meaning in our challenged world, its witness is strengthened when it offers connections back not only to the theological underpinnings of its tradition, but also to the concrete ways the tradition has been lived and practiced by its early practitioners. Identifying how historic figures practiced their faith and how they taught others to do

the same offers modern-day disciples both insight and concrete examples of how to strengthen their own practices today. It has been useful, for instance, not only to know Wesley's theology, but also to understand his development of small accountability groups for support in living the faith.<sup>5</sup> In a similar fashion, in his book *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*, Walter Brueggemann teaches that "the best sounds of Calvin" call us to "glorify God and enjoy God forever" and in doing so assert that "it is precisely the task of ministry to convene, evoke, form, and re-form a community of praise and obedience."<sup>6</sup> But an additional witness is offered when concrete examples point to and explain how Calvin's "best sounds" have been put into "best practice" toward forming such communities of praise.

Specifically of concern for this project is the realization that, perhaps due to a fear of works-righteousness (which will be reviewed in Chapter 2 of this paper), Luther scholarship and Lutheran self-understanding have focused more on theology and right thinking than on how right theological thinking might be lived out in diligent, accountable practice. It is the thesis of this paper that making accessible concrete examples of how and why Martin Luther held together his grace-centered theology with a diligent practice of praying the catechism would be a promising way to open dialogue around questions related to diligence and accountability to spiritual practice today. Understanding that Luther's diligence in the practice of praying the

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, eds., *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 320.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 28.

catechism did not loosen as his theology changed toward a grace-centered perspective, has important implications for how a grace-centered theology might be lived today.

### Thesis and Flow

The five components of the catechism—the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion—formed the basis for Luther’s daily practice of prayer. These same basic components of Christian faith continue to hold vast possibilities related to questions of diligence and accountability to living as Christians in today’s world. Luther’s *Small Catechism* (late 1528 or early 1529) is well known at least among Lutherans and is utilized regularly in the confirmation ministries of the church. Luther’s *Large Catechism* (1529), however, is widely underutilized today, particularly as a resource for spiritual reading. The one place where it seems to enjoy regular use, at least as a pedagogical source, is in courses of confessional theology in Lutheran seminaries. However, among the laity, Lutheran and otherwise, it seems known almost exclusively in name only. This project assesses whether or not this underutilization of the *Large Catechism*, specifically as a resource for spiritual reading today, is warranted, or if it holds hidden promise as a contribution to the ecumenical field of spirituality.

This project acknowledges that Luther’s explanations to the five components of the faith, having been written nearly five hundred years ago, may contain archaic and off-putting notions. The purpose of this investigation is to shed light on what happens when what is archaic and off-putting in this ancient catechism is set aside



and pushed past. Of interest is what remains to offer relevancy and richness and whether it serves as a springboard into deepened prayer and meditation on the components of the catechism. In other words, if the *Large Catechism* is critically reviewed in such a way that outdated notions are put into historical and cultural perspective, does enough good remain to warrant the development of a resource that would lift the *Large Catechism* up for contemporary use and accessibility? Does the *Large Catechism* offer a promising springboard for engaging dialogue between these five components of the faith and today's urgent questions?

While there is no argument that the cultural and historical realities facing Luther and the church of his day are markedly different than the cultural and historical realities facing today's Christians, the concern in this project is not to review the sixteenth-century questions and crises Luther reflected upon. Instead the concern focuses on how Luther engaged the catechetical format as spiritual reading to facilitate, structure, and deepen his own reflections on faith and life. What is of interest is how Luther approached the catechism as a resource for spiritual reading—reading for formation rather than primarily for information. This project seeks to assess the degree to which the localized and historically specific reflections Luther offers hinder the use of the *Large Catechism* as spiritual reading for today. Mainline churches generally agree that the five components of the catechism hold ageless wisdom and invite the best meditation and reflection of every age. This project assesses whether and to what degree Luther's *Large Catechism* serves as inspiration

and guide for taking these components seriously and passionately, as Luther did, as a word from God for us.

The emphasis in this thesis is not that what Luther wrote is necessarily vital for reflection, though some of it is surprisingly relevant and valuable, especially his opening reflections on the First Commandment. The emphasis instead is on whether or not Luther's now ancient efforts provide a promising structure through which and stimulus by which today's Christians can be invited into fresh contemporary and historically relevant reflection. For instance, Luther related his reflections on the Ten Commandments to the political and social upheaval facing sixteenth-century Germany, but he did so to listen for connections between his faith and his life. It was his practice to pray the catechism daily, even aloud, and he noted that when his pressing duties prevented him from doing so, his entire day went badly.<sup>7</sup> The thesis of this project assumes that today's Christians ought to be no less diligent in listening intently for connections between faith and life and seeks to assess how well the *Large Catechism* offers a promising resource for stimulating such reflection. The value of Luther's *Large Catechism* is not exclusively or even primarily in the answers he gives, but in the diligence and intensity with which he demands that connections be made between faith and life, and in the structure the catechism offers toward accountability to those connections. The thesis proposes that even if Luther may have missed the mark in some of his reflections in his *Large Catechism*, and even though the issues of today are different than the issues he faced, there continues to be

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 18.

substantial value in entering into dialogue with his *Large Catechism* for the purpose of stimulating listening for God's voice today as intently as Luther listened for that voice in his day. Specifically, the thesis seeks to assess the usefulness of Luther's *Large Catechism* not for historical or informational purposes, but for the purposes of spiritual reading.

The thesis of this project points to Luther's *Large Catechism* as a currently underutilized resource that warrants being made newly accessible as a promising springboard for stimulating prayerful contemporary reflection on faith and life. The purpose of this project is not to evaluate the relevancy of Luther's heart-attentive responses to the challenges of his day, but rather to assess whether and to what degree revisiting Luther's *Large Catechism* would stimulate a similar heart-attentive listening for God's Word today. While recognizing the limitations of its original context, this project seeks to assess the usefulness of Luther's *Large Catechism* as spiritual reading for the purpose of prayerful diligence and accountability toward connecting faith and life today.

### Rationale

In his foreword to Joan Chittister's *The Rule of St. Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, John Farina, editor of the Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series, explains why Crossroad Publishing instigated the Spiritual Legacy Series. He notes that "many who have lived before us have learned the hard way that turning to the depths is the way to a fuller life." He further points out that "their insights have been handed down, often in forms that are now hard to find and harder to read. Their language is archaic.

Their morality out of sync with ours. Their clarity, off-putting. Their humility, disconcerting.”<sup>8</sup> This may sound negative and seem to discourage a deeper look into these sages of former times. However, in response to these acknowledged limitations, Farina goes on to assert his conviction that “they are there, waiting quietly to share with us their hard-won wisdom, waiting to dialog with us as we face situations that are different from those they encountered only in the particulars, not in the essences.”<sup>9</sup> Farina acknowledges the broad challenges of accessing this dialogue across the ages. “Often many centuries and numerous barriers of language, customs, philosophy, and style separate us from the writings of bygone sages.”<sup>10</sup> The Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series, through contemporary commentary on the text, seeks to bridge the age-old insights of the past to the hunger for insight stirring within the present-day disciple.

Of interest to this paper is the fact that none of the writings of Martin Luther are included in this Crossroad Series. A similar series, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, has included the version of the anonymous mystical writing *Theologia Germanica* celebrated by Luther and published by his strong recommendation.<sup>11</sup> However, this extensive series, like the Crossroad Series, does not include any of the writings of Luther’s own pen. The rationale for this paper stems from a curiosity about whether or not Martin Luther’s *Large Catechism* might warrant the careful

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<sup>8</sup> John Farina, foreword to *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, by Joan Chittister (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 9

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>11</sup> *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. Bengt Hoffman, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 41.

contemporary attention and updated accessibility other classics of the spiritual life have received. As a writing of a “bygone sage,” the *Large Catechism*, like other dated writings will certainly be found to be archaic, out of sync and off-putting, yet it may also likewise be “waiting to share with us [its] hard-won wisdom, waiting to dialog with us. . .”<sup>12</sup> today.

Additionally, with Marjorie Thompson, author of *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* we agree, “While not all of tradition is worth preserving, there are so many riches to be recovered from its storehouse that we should be glad to sift the treasures from the sand in which they are buried.”<sup>13</sup> It would not be surprising for some to ask why we would want to study the writings of Martin Luther, a sixteenth-century dead male theologian, at all. In his foreword to *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy Lull, Jaroslav Pelikan, Sterling Professor of History at Yale University, comments specifically on the need for Luther research and for plumbing deeply for what is valuable in the traditions of “every time and every place.” Pelican notes:

It is ultimately with the practical implications—that is, with the implications for Christian *praxis*—that Martin Luther was concerned. . . . If my reading of the state of the church—and the state of all churches—is accurate, the crisis both of their *praxis* and of their doctrine has reached the point where it will require the witness of the communion of saints of “every time and place” to summon them to discipleship. In the communion of saints, Luther occupies a special place. . . .<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Farina, foreword to *Rule of Benedict*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson. *Soul Feast: An Introduction to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, foreword to *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1989), xiv.

As partners in ecumenical dialogue Lutherans have opportunity and perhaps responsibility to consider whether there are untapped contributions in Luther's writings that could be introduced as useful for those seeking spiritual insights for today. It would seem well for continued steps to be creatively taken to deal with what is archaic, off-putting, sexist, and racist in Luther's writings so that what remains of lasting value might be made more widely accessible today. (For an excellent example of this creative effort the reader may wish to see Timothy Lull's *My Conversations with Martin Luther*.<sup>15</sup> In an easily approachable style, Lull invites the reader into five brief conversations with Luther. As a five-week adult forum series in my congregation, two readers were invited to present these conversations between Luther and Lull, with Luther in costume. Each conversation made for a stimulating, humorous and educational half-hour presentation.) The riches hidden under the outdated packages of centuries past, as Marjorie Thompson has stated, just may be worth fresh investigation.<sup>16</sup> This current project grew out of curiosity about whether or not Luther's *Large Catechism* might warrant this kind of fresh investigation.

Important also to the rationale for this project was a curiosity about whether Luther's encouragement of the use of the catechismal format itself is a valid and useful format for today. The catechismal format is essentially a question-answer pattern focusing on the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion. Luther offers his own answers or reflections

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<sup>15</sup> Timothy Lull. *My Conversations with Martin Luther*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 13.

on each of these components of the faith calling Christians to accountability and diligence in graciously living as Christians in the world. His personal practice and explicit directive was to use the catechism for daily practice. He observed and taught this practice with diligence, not so he and others would gain salvation by doing so, but as a way of living accountable to their faith. Luther wrote in his preface to the *Large Catechism*, “It is highly profitable and fruitful to read [the catechism] daily and to make it the subject of meditation and conversation.”<sup>17</sup> More precisely he adds, “In such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested.”<sup>18</sup> The question at hand was to investigate with modern-day Christians whether such reading, conversation, and meditation using the catechism, and explicitly Luther’s *Large Catechism*, held meaning for them as a relevant means of the Holy Spirit’s bestowing of light today. If the *Large Catechism* were presented in a user-friendly, accessible manner as a document in its own right rather than as supplementary material for a broader curriculum, would it help the catechism “taste better and better and [be] digested”<sup>19</sup>? Would it serve the purpose of aiding Christians in supporting each other today in being accountable to living as Christians in the world?

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, “Preface to the *Large Catechism*,” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), 381.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

One of the initial reasons for focusing here on the *Large Catechism* was a curiosity about its apparent underutilization today in the church even though it is commonly held to be an important document from the Reformation years. For reasons not entirely clear, its assumed importance has not transferred into general use. Of Luther's writings, his *Large Catechism* appears to be one that has been largely neglected as a resource not only for Lutherans but also for ecumenical use.

It is noteworthy that over the two-plus decades I have served as a Lutheran pastor and have been engaged in numerous ecumenical discussions and retreats, I have had conversations with no one except Lutheran clergy who remembers ever having been introduced to Luther's *Large Catechism*. One of the members of my congregation stated it most crisply: "None of our pastors has ever bothered to introduce the *Large Catechism* to us." To be sure, in considering recommendations for resources from within the Lutheran tradition that could contribute to the ecumenical field of spirituality, the *Large Catechism* is hardly on the radar screen. We were interested here in investigating whether this particular underrecognition and underutilization is warranted, or whether the ecumenical church might be served by a more careful look at the structure and intent of the *Large Catechism*.

Thankfully, a wonderful adult education curriculum, Connections: Faith and Life, utilizes The *Large Catechism* as a primary resource.<sup>20</sup> This curriculum combines the use of both the *Small Catechism* and the *Large Catechism* and guides

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<sup>20</sup> Norma C. Everist and Nelvin Vos. *Connections: Faith and Life* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries, 1997).



the participants in Bible study and small group activities and discussion formats. Its chapters include “Living Faithfully” (The Ten Commandments), “Living Confidently” (The Apostles’ Creed), “Living Spiritually” (The Lord’s Prayer), and “Living Freely” (The Sacraments). By 2003 Connections: Faith and Life is planned to be available on *Fisher’s Net*, a purchasable Internet Web site of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This upcoming Web-site accessibility will be a wonderful contribution not only for Lutherans but also for the ecumenical field of religious education today that I hope will be well utilized in years to come.

However, while *Connections: Faith and Life* provides helpful excerpt summaries of sections of the *Large Catechism*, it utilizes the catechism as a primary resource for a broader curriculum and is not intended as a systematic introduction to the *Large Catechism* per se. The purpose and contribution of *Connections: Faith and Life* is not primarily to introduce and make accessible the *Large Catechism* as an ancient document in its own right with a promising structure for encouraging current meditation and reflection. As a resource for adult education *Connections: Faith and Life* provides an exceptionally attractive introduction to the *Large Catechism*, which I hope will enjoy much fuller use in our churches. Its purpose, however, is different than what we are proposing here. The goal of this current project is to assess the value of Luther’s *Large Catechism* as an introduction and guide for combining a grace-centered spirituality with accountability and diligence in connecting faith with life.

Chapter 2 reviews the development of this grace-centered thought in Luther. It will also highlight how Luther, rather than understanding grace as taking us off the hook related to diligence, attributed grace with making diligence possible. This chapter traces how Luther came to experience himself as set free for a grace-centered practice of faith and how that freedom called him to both diligence and accountability in connecting faith with life. The *Theologia Germanica*, an anonymous medieval tract Luther brought to publication, is reviewed in this chapter in order to shed light on Luther's attraction to this document in which God's initiating grace is assumed and celebrated. Further, this brief review of the *Theologia Germanica* is included to illustrate similarities between this mystical writing and Luther's own pastoral and devotional efforts to provide practical guidance related to living in response to God's grace.

Chapter 3 offers a review of the contours of *spiritual reading* as background for this project's goal of assessing the value of the *Large Catechism* as a structure for approaching the Ten Commandments as spiritual reading. The phrase spiritual reading is used in this paper synonymously with *sacred reading* or *divine reading*, translated from the ancient Latin *lectio divina*. The ancient practice of *lectio divina* is briefly described with particular attention on its relationship to Luther's own practice of prayer as reading the word with the heart. Of concern in this chapter is the way in which Luther changed the approach to scripture from the way it had generally been approached in the monastery. Additionally, attention is given to the way in which

Luther changed the pattern of prayer from the pattern he had inherited from earlier tradition.

Chapter 4 describes the process of identifying participants and gathering their responses to an investigation of Luther's *Large Catechism* as a resource for stimulating contemporary reflection on the Ten Commandments in light of today's world. This chapter details the demographics of the participants and summarizes both individual responses and an overall view gleaned from participants' journal and graphed responses. In addition to the First Commandment, each participant read what Luther wrote concerning this commandment in the *Large Catechism* and then prayed that commandment in light of today's twenty-first-century questions. Of concern in this chapter is the general sense of how the volunteer participants evaluated the usefulness of Luther's *Large Catechism* as a stimulating resource for making connections between faith and life today.

In Chapter 5 conclusions are drawn from the data gathered in this project. This project points to the surprisingly contemporary nature of the catechism and names the First Commandment as the flagship commandment. It also acknowledges that it is necessary to carefully navigate readers through what is archaic while not losing the actual writing of the original document. This chapter sets Luther's document in the context of Laurence Freeman's suggestions related to the importance of asking "redemptive questions." In response to the data gathered, a suggested outline is offered for Series A (the Ten Commandments) of an adult series on the

*Large Catechism*. The series title is “Luther’s *Large Catechism: Reading the Word with the Heart Today*.”

In regard to the scope of this project, the effort to articulate spirituality in light of a Lutheran confessional understanding is intended to provide contextual and theological grounding and is not intended to limit the study or the conclusions to those who are members of the Lutheran church. This project assumes that Lutheran spirituality has a contribution to make to the ecumenical field of spirituality. The targeted audience for focusing conclusions and implications is the ecumenical adult Christian community. It was for the purposes of clarifying the contextual and theological grounding of the project that effort was made to articulate the centrality of grace in Lutheran spirituality. A central assumption of this project is that, as Bradley Hanson, professor of religion at Luther College (Decorah, Iowa) and author of *A Graceful Life: Lutheran Spirituality for Today*, points out, “The very heart of Lutheran spirituality is that it seeks to foster a relationship of trust that God’s merciful grace under-girds all of life.”<sup>21</sup>

An underlying hope of this project is that it will uncover for the ecumenical community an underrecognized contribution from within the Protestant tradition. Protestants, not recognizing the rich resources also available within their own heritage, have long gone outside their own traditions for spiritual guidance. Martha Ellen Stortz, professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (Berkeley, California), speaks specifically of Lutherans when

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<sup>21</sup> Bradley Hanson, *A Graceful Life: Lutheran Spirituality for Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000), 38.

she acknowledges, “If Lutherans find nothing in their own tradition they will turn to other traditions for information and formation.”<sup>22</sup> This became poignantly clear to me a few years ago when the Holy Spirit Retreat Center in Encino, California, invited me to serve part-time as Adjunct Staff for Spiritual Direction to respond to the increasing requests they were receiving for spiritual direction from Protestants, including Lutherans. The Holy Spirit Retreat Center is owned and operated by the Sisters of Social Service of the Roman Catholic Church, but also serves the many Protestants who seek support for spiritual direction there, often times because they don’t know where to look within their own denominations. There are many benefits to turning to other traditions for spiritual support; in fact, there are ecumenical riches we should all receive from each other. The broad thesis of this paper is that more Lutheran contributions could be added to this sharing and that specifically, Luther’s *Large Catechism*, which seems largely underutilized today, is worthy of further contemporary investigation.

Although Luther’s *Large Catechism* includes reflection on the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, Confession, Baptism and Holy Communion, in order to honor constraints of time and space, this project will be limited to the Ten Commandments. Any one of the components could have justifiably been chosen, but Luther begins with the commandments in his catechisms and they offer an appropriate foundation from which to begin this project as well. Speaking to the

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<sup>22</sup> Martha Ellen Stortz. “Practicing Christians: Prayer as Formation,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*. eds. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998) 63.

fundamental nature of the Ten Commandments, Stortz asserts that we are “normed and informed by the Decalogue.” Furthering her thought, she quotes from Luther’s *Large Catechism* substantiating that the Decalogue has made clear “all that God wishes us to do or not to do.”<sup>23</sup> But as Stortz suggests, and this project assumes, any effort to make connections between faith and life, as questions related to diligence and accountability to a life of faith do, cannot be limited to a focus on actions—on what God wishes us to do or not do. To center the focus on actions, claims Stortz, would miss “the initiating shape of the Christian life: faith in the promises of God.”<sup>24</sup> Luther pointed to the centrality of the promise asserting, “If it weren’t for the promise, I wouldn’t pray.”<sup>25</sup> We turn now in Chapter 2 to a brief review of the historical and theological foundations that shaped Luther’s environment and developing thought related to the promises of God in the Word.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther’s Works*, 52.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In this chapter we are concerned with the historical and theological foundations that gave rise to a fear of works-righteousness and that led to an uneasiness, that continues to this day, regarding the relationship between diligence in the practice of faith and the promise of salvation by grace through faith. Of additional interest is the spiritual history that inspired Luther's theologically and biblically based challenge related to the devotional practices he had inherited. Along a similar line, attention will be given to Luther's insistence on the importance of reading the Word of God from the heart in order to ascertain its true spirit and teach and preach it rightly.

#### A Brief Review of Luther's Encounter with the Word

A Trinitarian expression of God's relationship with us is summarized and ecumenically confessed in the articles of the three ecumenical creeds.<sup>1</sup> From this place of broad apostolic agreement Christianity has, over the centuries and across continents, taken on specific ways of expressing faith. The development of these expressions of faith is always influenced by dynamics of culture, language, history, and location. The Lutheran movement, born in sixteenth-century Europe, is one of the many historically and culturally influenced expressions of Christian faith. It began both as a response to theological insights, disagreements, and struggles within the sixteenth-century church and within the heart and mind of Martin Luther.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, "Preface to the *Large Catechism*," in *Book of Concord*, 384.

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Saxony. As he grew and invested himself in a challenging educational environment, he soon became known for his intellectual sophistication and energy. As a young adult, he was deeply convinced by the church of his day and by his family of origin that he was responsible for taking the actions deemed necessary for salvation. As the course of his life would have it, Luther eventually became an Augustinian monk, giving himself over, as Roland Bainton puts it, “with confidence to the life which the Church regarded as the surest way of salvation.”<sup>2</sup> While his novice year in the monastery was rather typical, in the years following his profession of vows his efforts to save his soul were alarmingly intense, surpassing all standards even for sixteenth-century monks. He was committed to fasting, scourging, and self-discipline as if his soul depended upon it. But as conscientious as he was, he still found no peace. Luther had entered the monastery, as Bainton puts it, to “set himself to the pursuit of holiness,”<sup>3</sup> but found himself repeatedly tormented by doubts that he could ever do enough “monkery” (as he called the fasting, praying, mortifications of the flesh, and so on) to make himself holy enough for God.”<sup>4</sup>

While a monk, Luther was directed to return to university studies so he could qualify for the post of lector in the order. Early on, he found little help for his anguished soul from his studies because the scholastic teaching of his day reinforced the very thinking that was causing him despair. His early professors taught that

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



human beings could, of their own free will, without the help of grace, “choose to do what was morally good and avoid what was morally evil, follow and enjoy the Divine commands.”<sup>5</sup> Try as he did however, Luther did not experience within himself this ability to choose the morally good. No matter how “good” Luther tried to be, he was convinced it was not good enough to persuade a just God of his worthiness.

Luckily for Luther the vicar-general of the Augustinian order in Germany, Johann von Staupitz, listened to Luther in his anguish and pointed Luther in helpful directions. Staupitz gave Luther sound spiritual guidance “concerning personal trust in God and the righteousness of Christ which is accessible to faith.”<sup>6</sup> Staupitz’s guidance did not free Luther from his anguish, but it “shifted the emphasis from sins to sin,” from wrongful actions to the core nature of humanity.<sup>7</sup> This shift proved to be significant. Yet of even greater significance was the strong personal encouragement on the part of Professor Staupitz that Luther should study for his doctorate in theology, undertake the practice of preaching and biblical study, and finally assume the chair of Bible at the newly established University of Wittenburg.<sup>8</sup> From 1508 to 1512, Luther studied for his doctorate and three weeks after graduating in 1512, he was appointed to succeed Staupitz as professor of Bible. It was while Luther prepared lectures on the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians for this capacity as Bible teacher that he came to his understanding of the righteousness of God, which

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<sup>5</sup> See *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 59.

comes not through our merit or efforts, but through God's gracious gift. Of his study of Paul's writings, Luther acknowledged, "I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant."<sup>9</sup> Luther further admits that "night and day" he pondered the connection between God's justice and Paul's quoting from the Hebrew scripture Habakkuk, "the just shall live by his faith." Luther describes his experience this way:

Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole scripture took on new meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Luther used this same phrase of feeling himself "reborn" when he wrote of his encounter with grace through the Psalter. He had been afraid of the judgment in the Psalms until he became convinced through his encounter with the scriptures that righteousness was God's doing through the gift of justification. From then on the Psalms, especially in worship and the devotional life, became very dear to Luther.<sup>11</sup>

In reviewing Luther's spiritual history, historian and biographer Martin Brecht explains that what or who exactly led Luther to turn to the Bible "can no longer be determined."<sup>12</sup> We know at least that Luther was introduced to the Bible through the liturgy and lessons of worship, though the interpretation the Bible received within the worship setting contributed extensively to Luther's crisis of faith. The interpretation Luther grew up with presented God, through the scriptures, as a demanding wrathful

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther's Works*, 403

<sup>12</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 85.

judge. The scripture claimed that God demanded righteousness, and Luther learned by extremely conscientious effort that he could not rise to that demand. It was not until Luther was grasped by the promise in the scriptures that God provided this righteousness as a free gift that his crisis of faith resolved into peace and comfort. This comfort was long in coming and involved a traumatic personal, theological and biblical journey. Luther's retrospective lament was that for so many years none of the great theologians of the church, including himself, had been able to offer him this comfort through God's Word that he eventually came to know as utterly essential to life.<sup>13</sup>

Luther judgingly claimed that "during his time in the monastery the Bible was despised."<sup>14</sup> The novices in the monastery were given a Bible and were permitted to read it, so Luther had received one, but after the novitiate year the attention of the monks was directed, not toward the Bible, but toward scholastics, such as Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. Nonetheless, Luther found ways to become extraordinarily familiar with the Bible, so familiar "that he knew what was on every page."<sup>15</sup> In his *Table Talk*, Luther spoke of his time in the monastery, explaining, "With great loathing I read physics, and my heart was aglow when the time came to return to the Bible . . . I read the Bible diligently."<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, he noted, one important phrase from the Bible would occupy his thoughts for an entire day. As early as 1514, Luther, the monk, was criticizing other monks and priests who lifted up philosophers

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther's Works*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

and neglected or misinterpreted the Word of God. For Luther, right interpretation was essential, and he criticized all the monks, except Staupitz, for reading the Bible solely as an intellectual practice and not for “existential meditation.” Luther believed the Bible had to be reflected on deeply from the heart in order to grasp its true spirit. In his own study, he would set aside theological and philosophical writers and “sweat over the Bible.”<sup>17</sup> Through his encounters with God’s grace through the scriptures, Luther came to believe that the greatest sins a priest could commit were not of the flesh, but rather were of “dealing falsely with the word of truth.”<sup>18</sup> When the Bible was read in worship, and especially for Luther, the Psalms, it was meant to point to Christ who alone saves us from what Luther called *Anfechtungen* (loosely translated as despair brought on by the abandonment of grace).<sup>19</sup>

From the time of his personal encounter with this truth in the Word, and throughout the remainder of his life, Luther insisted that Christ comes to bestow comfort and grace through the Word and was not a tyrant as he had once feared and as others taught. In his later years, Luther spoke as if to himself, “Good God, what do you think it means that he has given his only Son? It means that he also offers whatever else he possesses. We have no reason, therefore, to fear his wrath. . . .”<sup>20</sup> In a similar way, he comforted his hearers, and we might add himself, with the reminder that “since Christ accepted the thief on the cross just as he was and Paul after all his

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<sup>17</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther's Works*, 17.

blasphemies. . . . we have no reason to despair.”<sup>21</sup> The intensity of fear Luther had experienced regarding this assumed wrath was matched only by his own later twofold intensity of joy and determination: joy, in knowing that the scriptures corrected this assumption of wrath, and determination, that this comforting Word should be rightly proclaimed.

In addition to being a university professor, Luther also served as a parish preacher in the local congregations. His personal investment in the lives of his listeners led him to quickly begin incorporating in his teaching and preaching the new understanding of grace he had encountered through the scriptures. Even if it created tension for him and for the church, Luther was compelled by his discovery of the graciousness of the gospel to speak boldly of it. Even if it countered the church of his day, which of course it did, Luther found he could do no other than speak the truth as he had come to see it. The Reformation began then as Luther took his profound biblical and spiritual insights of salvation by grace through faith into the pulpit, into his teaching, and to the relatively newly invented printing press.

The first controversy involved the church’s sale of indulgences, a four-hundred-year-old practice of allowing people to buy remission of their sins. Luther’s new understanding that salvation is God’s gift and not our doing convinced him that this practice of selling indulgences was not only wrong, but also dangerous. The rest of Luther’s life found him involved albeit against his will, in “the controversy with

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

ecclesiastical and political authorities” that forced him into “the career of a reformer.”<sup>22</sup> His work remained throughout at once that of a pastor and of a biblical and systematic theologian, and involved not only his own existential encounter with grace through the scriptures but also a renewal of the church and Christian devotional life that carries on to this day.

### Luther and the *Theologia Germanica*

Of significance in understanding the development of Luther’s existential encounter with the Word is his decision to have published for wider readership the fourteenth century anonymous and untitled devotional book later called the *Theologia Germanica*. Luther discovered a handwritten copy of this document near the end of 1516 and was so impressed that he had it published immediately by the Wittenberg printer, Gruenberg. It thus became Luther’s very first publication, though not of his own pen. Luther celebrated the *Theologia Germanica* as “something that helped underscore the central thrust of the gospel.”<sup>23</sup> In his preface to his 1516 edition of *Theologia Germanica*, Luther writes:

If I may speak with biblical foolishness: Next to the Bible and Saint Augustine no other book has come to my attention from which I have learned—and desired to learn—more concerning God, Christ, man, and what all things are.<sup>24</sup>

Present within the theology of the *Theologia Germanica* is an understanding of the centrality of God’s initiating grace that appears to be almost seamlessly

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<sup>22</sup> *Introduction to Career of the Reformer: I*, vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, ix.

<sup>23</sup> *Theologia Germanica*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

consistent with Luther's own thought. The anonymous author of the *Theologia*

*Germanica* writes:

It is a great folly for man, or any creature, . . . to imagine that he knows and can do anything good to earn ample merits and gain much ground before God. If man rightly understood, he would see that he offers God a sham by such attempts. But God in His true goodness is indulgent toward man, who in his vain and awkward ways knows no better.<sup>25</sup>

The claim that God, in goodness, is indulgent toward us is part of the great conviction of the Reformation. It is not our task to make our selves right before God. God's goodness has beaten us to it, lavishing us with acceptance and salvation in Christ. The author of the *Theologia Germanica* writes in an earlier chapter: "In other words, bliss or blessedness does not depend on any one created thing or on a creature's work but only on God and His works."<sup>26</sup> Frank Senn, Lutheran pastor and editor of and contributor to a collection of essays entitled *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, reinforces this same thought repeatedly: "Luther is one with the mystics in emphasizing human passivity before the grace of God." Luther himself acknowledged that "We are beggars, all. . ." before the grace of God. Luther knew that "true faith is not one which relies on one's own works but one which trusts in the promises of God."<sup>27</sup> In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the *Small Catechism*, Luther writes what may be one of the more commonly memorized of Luther's explanations:

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Senn, "Lutheran Spirituality," in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Fred Senn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 19.

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common true faith.<sup>28</sup>

Since Lutheran spirituality insists that we stand passively before the grace of God, the function of spiritual practice takes on a different light than that of adding anything to God's grace. As it has been said, "we offer God a sham" if we try to gain ground before God by our own efforts.<sup>29</sup> Lutheran spirituality knows better than to advocate offering such a sham. The challenge before us does not lie in God's gift of grace, but rather in our blindness to this gift and our illusion that we can live without it.

Consistent with Luther's thought, the *Theologia Germanica* several times uses the image of the sun and its shining to explain our relationship with God. Sin is recognized as the illusion that the sun's rays exist apart from the sun. Or, in using a different analogy, sin is compared to believing that the hand has life apart from the body. The urgency of Lutheran spirituality would be consistent with the desire spoken of in the *Theologia Germanica*: "Would that I were united with the eternal Good as the hand is part of the body."<sup>30</sup>

For Luther, we are all in need of outward help in fighting this deception that life can exist apart from God and in remembering that our true self is found only in God as the sun's rays shine because they are of the sun. Luther reminds his readers

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<sup>28</sup> Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 355.

<sup>29</sup> *Theologia Germanica*, 131.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



that even though he himself is a doctor of the church, “just as learned and experienced as all of them, . . .” each morning and whenever else he had time, he needed to read and study the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Psalms, and other foundational writings of the faith.<sup>31</sup> This spiritual practice added nothing to his salvation, but helped him fight the illusion and self-deception that tempted him to think that he could live apart from God. Luther would not disagree with the *Theologia Germanica* in its conviction that “[a]ll things have their being more truly in God than in themselves and in their own powers, life, and other endowments.”<sup>32</sup>

For the *Theologia Germanica*, the realization that we are “more truly in God than in [ourselves]” does not take us off the hook for living humbly and responsibly in the real world. The *Theologia Germanica* goes on to explain that “few people come to the truth who have not begun with the practice of order and rules. . . . Therefore, laws and commands, order and rules, are not to be despised and scorned in the realm of humble spirituality.”<sup>33</sup>

It is with a similar sentiment that Luther writes in his preface to the *Large Catechism*.

Let all Christians drill themselves in the catechism daily, and constantly put it into practice, guarding themselves with the greatest care and diligence. . . . If they show such diligence, then I promise them—and their experience will bear me out—that they will gain much fruit and God will make excellent people out of them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 380.

<sup>32</sup> *Theologia Germanica*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 383.

Throughout his writings, Luther insists that God is the one doing the acting. Even “if Christians drill themselves with the catechism daily,” Luther is no less adamant that it is God who “will make excellent people out of them.”<sup>35</sup> It is God’s doing and not our own, even when we are diligent in spiritual practice. It is all grace and gift. The hand does not have life except through the body. Jesus said this long ago in John 15: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me and I in you, if you abide in me you will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>36</sup> Luther understood that our lives “are not project, but overflow.”<sup>37</sup> To continue the imagery used in the *Theologia Germanica*, the arm enjoys the extenuation of the hand and could not extend without it. The sun shines through the rays that extend from it. The one is a part of the other. The vine bears its fruit through its branches. Author and theologian Frederick Buechner speaks to this in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, by suggesting that, “[t]he spirit of God, Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, is highly contagious.”<sup>38</sup> Buechner elaborates, saying, “When people are very excited, very happy, very sad, you can catch it from them as easily as measles or a yawn.”<sup>39</sup> Spirituality is being caught up in this contagion. Luther uses the image of apples on a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> John 15:5.

<sup>37</sup> Francis Roberts, *Come Away My Beloved* (Palos Verdes Estates, CA: The King’s Press, 1970), 88.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 110.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

tree: “For apples do not make a tree, but a tree makes apples. So faith first makes a person, who afterwards performs works.”<sup>40</sup>

A poster by Corita Kent, artist and Sister of the Immaculate Heart order, is displayed on an upstairs wall at the Immaculate Heart Center at La Casa de Maria in Montecito, California. It reads: “You are a field of energy in an infinite energy field. Yield.” This infinite energy field is God’s grace and we are in it more than we know. As the *Theologia Germanica* claims, “All things have their being more truly in God than in other endowments.”<sup>41</sup> From within this field of grace the poster gently commands us to “yield.” But even yielding, Luther would emphasize, is not something we can choose to do. We yield only because the Holy Spirit gives us the grace to do what the law commands. That a Christian’s position is one of receiving was clear to Luther: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel. . . .”<sup>42</sup> God takes the initiative.

### History and Role of the Lutheran Confessional Writings

The Lutheran church considers itself called to always be reforming itself toward the gospel. Lutheran pastor, teacher, and writer, Daniel Erlander writes, “As Lutherans we understand ourselves to be a teaching movement within the catholic church—teaching the Word of unconditional grace and teaching the necessity of

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<sup>40</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, vol. 26 of *Luther’s Works*, 225-26.

<sup>41</sup> *Theologia Germanica*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 355.

reformation that the life of the church may conform to the gospel.”<sup>43</sup> As the Lutheran church moved beyond the sixteenth century and beyond its European birthplace, it had to come to know itself anew if it was to continue to define Lutheranism within the larger context of Christianity. What makes something Lutheran? What characteristics are required for a spirituality to be named Lutheran? What characteristics or expressions would place a definition of spirituality outside of the self-understanding of Lutheranism? Is there any “common commitment” about relationship with God that is jointly held by the diversity of people who claim the name Lutheran? Understanding these questions is helpful as Lutherans seek to contribute to the ecumenical field of spirituality.

In *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* Senn warns of the challenges inherent in trying to define Lutheran spirituality, but points ultimately to the confessional writings as the best source of Lutheran identification. He stresses that Lutheranism has spanned “five centuries and six continents” including Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America.<sup>44</sup> He goes on to acknowledge that what holds these diverse people together is not culture, language, history, custom, land, or class, but rather a “common commitment to some or all of the confessional writings included in the *Book of Concord*.”<sup>45</sup>

In *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, Willard Allbeck explains further that the Lutheran Confessions are the collection of documents, articles, formulas, treatises,

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Erlander, *Baptized We Live: Lutheranism As a Way of Life* (Chelan, WA: Holden Village, 1981), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Senn. 9

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

apologies, creeds, and catechisms, which sixteenth-century Lutherans acknowledged as “accurate formulations of their beliefs.”<sup>46</sup> Even in that first century of the Reformation, however, and on down to today, not everyone who considered or now considers themselves Lutheran recognizes the authority or value of these documents. What is significant is that there was in the sixteenth century and continues to be today enough consensus that it was and continues to be appropriate that this collection of writings is called the Lutheran Confessions. In 1580, over thirty years after Luther’s death, the *Book of Concord* was gathered together for the first time in one volume.

Identifying the *Book of Concord* as “the authoritative confessional book for Lutherans around the globe,” professors Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, authors of *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings*, make note that Luther was “an ecumenist, not a sectarian.”<sup>47</sup> By that they mean that he stood within the larger tradition of Christendom and sought to speak to it rather than to withdraw from it. When the Lutheran movement, of which Luther was the initial though not the only spokesperson, was asked to justify its existence at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, it did so as a theological movement. It was not a break-off sect, but saw itself as firmly rooted within the Christian faith and dedicated to “expound, to guard, and to celebrate the cheering news that Christ liberates mankind from sin, death, and evil.”<sup>48</sup> The writings of the *Book of Concord* assert this theological

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<sup>46</sup> Willard Dow Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), vii.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

commitment throughout. The *Large Catechism* is one of the collected writings within the *Book of Concord*.

### Theological Foundations

It could be tempting to assume that one could try to understand Lutheran spirituality by looking at the spirituality of Martin Luther alone. However, as Senn points out, “Luther and Lutheranism are not the same.”<sup>49</sup> They are not simply interchangeable with an understanding of one leading directly to a definition of the other. Luther lived and worked in sixteenth-century Europe. Lutheranism today is global, multilingual, multicultural, and nearly five hundred years old. In addition, Lutheranism is a reforming movement, not a static product of an earlier century or of the person whose name it bears against his will. (Luther urged against the use of his name, saying that “. . . the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone. Let us call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold.”<sup>50</sup>)

In many ways, probing into Luther’s spirituality is a complex endeavor. Senn points out that recent research on Luther has made it clear that his spirituality cannot be understood apart from his academic career, his biblical study as encounter with the Word, and his own existential questions. More precisely, Senn notes that “Luther’s spiritual experience cannot be separated from his exegetical discoveries and theological reflections.” Continuing, Senn comments on many older interpretations

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<sup>49</sup> Senn, *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, vii.

of Luther that failed to recognize Luther's basic convictions were not arrived at by "purely academic research, but as a consequence of his struggles with God."<sup>51</sup>

Acknowledging that Luther is not synonymous with Lutheranism, and that Luther the man is complex, it can be stated with certainty that Luther was a man devoted to prayer in all arenas of his life. Prayer undergirded his life as an Augustinian monk, as a university professor, as a biblical scholar, as a parish preacher, as a marriage partner, as a father, and as a child of God. No part of his personal or professional life placed him outside of an attitude of urgency related to prayer.<sup>52</sup>

But why, one still may ask, would Luther be so devoted to a life of disciplined prayer and meditation on scripture, including the catechism, when he was so confident that any effort on his part to make himself right with God was unnecessary and condemned? Why, if all is grace, would one insist on such devotion and discipline to a life of prayer and meditation, and especially why would one call for meditation on something so apparently works oriented as the Ten Commandments? Again, while some may have seen a contradiction here, Luther did not. Luther was convinced that any effort or contribution we may attempt to make toward our own salvation is works-righteousness, and therefore to be under condemnation. But Luther was equally convinced of the power of the grace of God through the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about change in the human heart so that good work could be done. "If the person is changed, then—and only then—will the good works

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<sup>51</sup> Senn, *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> See Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," vol. 43 of *Luther's Works*, 193.

follow.”<sup>53</sup> Philip Melanchthon, author of the “Apology to the Augsburg Confession,” further elaborates on this understanding:

We maintain that good works must necessarily follow faith. For we do not abolish the law, Paul says (Romans 3:31), but we establish it, because when we receive the Holy Spirit by faith the fulfillment of the law necessarily follows. . . .<sup>54</sup>

In concurrence with the existential fear Luther dealt with in the monastery and as explanation of his reforming efforts in response to that fear, the authors of the Augsburg Confession point to the situation of former times. They describe how the doctrine of works “drove some into the desert, into monasteries, where they hoped to merit grace through the monastic life. Some contrived other works to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins.”<sup>55</sup> The Augsburg Confession explains that it was in response to this prevalent reality that the reformers worked to “pass on and restore this teaching about faith in Christ.”<sup>56</sup> Their hope was to bring consolation to “anxious consciences” so that they would “know that grace and forgiveness of sins are apprehended by faith in Christ.”<sup>57</sup>

Grounded in this conviction that we are saved by grace through faith the Augsburg Confession goes on to make it clear that this does not absolve us from the necessity of doing good: “Beyond this, our people teach that it is necessary to do good works, not that we should count on meriting grace through them but because it

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<sup>53</sup> See *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 25.

<sup>54</sup> “Apology to the Augsburg Confession,” in *Book of Concord*, 237.

<sup>55</sup> “The Augsburg Confession,” in *Book of Concord*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



is the will of God.”<sup>58</sup> What is made very clear at this point in the Augsburg Confession is that the doing of good works, which is the will of God, is possible only because of the Holy Spirit. The Augsburg Confession explains: “Because the Holy Spirit is received through faith, consequently hearts are renewed and endowed with new affections so as to be able to do good works.”<sup>59</sup>

The Reformation discussion firmly held the conviction that we do not save ourselves by our actions and, at the same time, asserted that this teaching was not a condemnation of good works in and of themselves. The Augsburg Confession took tedious pains to explain this further: “Hence it is readily apparent that no one should accuse this teaching of prohibiting good works. On the contrary, it is rather to be commended for showing how we can do good works.”<sup>60</sup> What is emphasized repeatedly is that “without faith human nature cannot possibly do the works of the First or Second Commandments.” The writers of the Augsburg Confession elaborated so that there could be no misunderstanding of the point they were trying to make: “Without faith [human nature] does not call upon God, expect anything from God. . . but seeks and trusts in human help.” The danger here is that “all kinds of urges and human designs rule in the heart when faith and trust in God are lacking.” The reformers developed their thought further by putting it in the context of the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Scriptures. They concluded, “That is why Christ said (John 15:[5]), “Apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>61</sup>

Prayer and meditation from a Lutheran perspective are grounded in this conviction spoken of in John 15:5: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Renewing and endowing us with “new affections” is the Spirit’s work. As Gerhard O. Forde, Professor of Theology at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, MN), explains in his article “The Lutheran View,” “according to Scripture, God is always the acting subject.”<sup>62</sup> Spiritual growth or “progress, if one can call it that, is that we are being shaped more and more by the totality of the grace coming to us. The progress is due to the steady invasion of the new.”<sup>63</sup> Forde elaborates”

There is a kind of growth and progress, it is to be hoped, but it is growth in grace—a growth in coming to be captivated more and more, if we can so speak, by the totality, the unconditionality of the grace of God. It is a matter of getting used to the fact that if we are to be saved it will have to be by grace *alone*.<sup>64</sup>

As always for Luther, this growth and progress is not growth or progress in our own righteousness. This growth or progress comes not as a result of inner work or commitment, but as we wait for God who “comes to us from the outside.” As Luther taught in his acclaimed *Lectures on Romans*, “We must wait for the naked mercy of God, who will reckon us righteous and wise.”<sup>65</sup> It was this working of God

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “The Lutheran View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 27. Forde’s emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, vol. 25 of *Luther’s Works*, 137.

that motivated Luther's prayer. As he celebrated in his *Table Talk*, "Prayer helps us very much and gives us a cheerful heart, not on account of any merit in the work, but because we have spoken with God and found everything to be in order."<sup>66</sup>

This issue of the relationship between God's work and our work came to a fore in an exchange of writings between Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Luther's treatise *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) was written in response to Erasmus's published criticisms of Luther's teachings on free choice. (Luther's self-evaluation of this treatise was that it was "one of his two or three very best works."<sup>67</sup>) In this treatise Luther puts forth what he saw as the very heart of the gospel. He agreed with Erasmus that the cardinal issue between them had to do with inquiring "what free choice can do, what it has done to it, and what is its relation to the grace of God."<sup>68</sup> For Luther, if we do not understand the relationship between divine grace and free choice, "we shall know nothing at all of things Christian."<sup>69</sup>

For, if I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me, what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me, although it is God who works everything in everyone.<sup>70</sup>

Luther's lengthy yet engaging response to Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will* (1526) is an example of Luther's often-missed dimension of pastoral awareness of our part in the work of grace. Luther recognizes that there is nothing, and he repeats,

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<sup>66</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther's Works*, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 of *Luther's Works*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

“and really nothing”<sup>71</sup> that can be attributed to our choice here. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther answers Erasmus’s criticisms by explaining that before we are created we do nothing towards becoming a creature. Likewise, we do nothing “toward remaining a creature.” These are both done “by the sole will of the omnipotent power and goodness of God, who creates and preserves us without our help. . . .”<sup>72</sup> But, perhaps the even greater mystery is that God does not work without us. Luther teaches that God “does not work in us without us, because it is for this he has created and preserved us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him.”<sup>73</sup>

Luther develops his argument against Erasmus further by relating this same process of our creation to how God brings about growth and change in us so that we become a new creation of the Spirit. Again, according to Luther, we do nothing and attempt “nothing to prepare. . . for this renewal and this Kingdom.” Likewise, we do nothing and attempt “nothing towards remaining in this Kingdom. The Spirit alone does both of these things in us. . . .” “But,” Luther repeats, this time relating to our being a new creation, God “does not work without us, because it is for this very thing he has recreated and preserves us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him.”<sup>74</sup> Both our creation and re-creation is God’s work that God does not do without us.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 242-43.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Luther's pastoral understanding here of how both creation and re-creation happen is, to the core, centered in God's initiating action. Without our help, God creates, preserves, and re-creates us. As God's new creation, then, "it is through us he [God] preaches, shows mercy to the poor, comforts the afflicted."<sup>75</sup> Luther returns to the point of controversy with Erasmus and concludes with these pointed remarks: "But what is attributed to free choice in all this? Or rather, what is there left for it but nothing? And really nothing!"<sup>76</sup>

The problem for Erasmus was not that he was "unmindful of God's grace."<sup>77</sup> Erasmus agreed we are saved by grace. But from Erasmus's point of view, Luther gave too much license for ungodliness by focusing on God's freedom to create, preserve, and re-create us without us. Perhaps one the most helpful summary explanations of this controversy over God's freedom is in the Introduction to *The Bondage of the Will*. We read, "For God's freedom is precisely the freedom of grace, that is, of the divine love revealed in Christ, which startlingly ignores the calculated schemes of merit and reward which prevail among men."<sup>78</sup> Throughout the intense debate between Luther and Erasmus, Luther remained convinced of the important difference between what God is free to do and what we do. He wrote that "... it behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God's power and our own, God's work and our own, if we want to live a godly life."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>79</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 of *Luther's Works*, 35.

How Luther responded to this controversy with Erasmus is particularly relevant to the thesis of this paper. Luther insisted, we “cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God,” if we do not know how much we should attribute to ourselves and our efforts and how much should be attributed to God.<sup>80</sup> How we understand the difference between God’s part and ours has important implications for the motivation toward prayer and meditation and all aspects of how we live our Christian lives. For Luther, the call to prayer and meditation is not a project we engage in to improve our “spirituality,” but rather it is a response of trust. At its core, Christian life is about trust. For Luther, to be a Christian is to trust God’s promises that we are made righteous in Christ. This is the freedom of the Christian. We do not have to try to make ourselves righteous before God. Indeed, we cannot. As Luther urged in his *Lectures on Romans*, our only job is to “wait for the naked mercy of God who will reckon us righteous and wise.”<sup>81</sup> But Luther in no way intended this to be drawn to the inappropriate conclusion that this then makes God’s laws and commands meaningless. As the Introduction to *The Bondage of the Will* explains, “On the contrary, it discloses [the true meaning of God’s laws and commandments], which is ultimately a demand for just such love as is seen in Christ.”<sup>82</sup> From this perspective, the practice of grace-centered faith has everything to do with trusting that we will “be treated according to God’s good pleasure.”<sup>83</sup> When we do that, we are “clinging to God’s promises” and not doubting that God, who is “true, just, and wise will do,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, vol. 25 of *Luther’s Works*, 137.

<sup>82</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 in *Luther’s Works*, 10-11.

<sup>83</sup> Luther, *The Freedom of the Christian*, vol. 31 in *Luther’s Works*, 350.

dispose, and provide all things well.”<sup>84</sup> The implications of this are that when we think or act as though God is powerless and as though the only reliable god is the god we try to become, we are not trusting God and not practicing grace-centered faith.

As Luther came to understand this, his approach to prayer changed from a fear that he must somehow make himself worthy through it, to a desire to deepen trust in the one who has already done “all things well”<sup>85</sup> on his behalf in Christ. Becoming lax in prayer as though grace was license for lack of diligence in practicing the faith is not found in Luther. To do so is to miss Luther’s reformed understanding of our relationship with God. Delighting in grace in the midst of practice was his way. To pray is to remember that Christ is our righteousness.

In *Gospel-Centered Spirituality: An Introduction to our Spiritual Journey*, Allan Sager, Professor for Contextual Education at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, responds to the fear that attention to the spiritual journey might err and be a kind of hidden works-righteousness. Against this fear Sager argues that “all pride in spirituality as ‘my response’ is swept away by the pervasive giftedness of the entire process.”<sup>86</sup> He states further that spirituality that is gospel-centered, as is Lutheran spirituality, “is anchored in the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”<sup>87</sup> Taken wrongly, this sweeping away of all pride in our response could lead to a misunderstanding of the good news of grace as if the gift becomes an argument

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Allan H. Sager, *Gospel-Centered Spirituality: An Introduction to Our Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 76.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

against doing any good works at all. In their book *Lutheranism*, Gritsch and Jenson elaborate on this in their discussion of the *Adiaphora* Concept. (*Adiaphora* comes from the Greek *adiaphoron*, meaning “a thing that makes no difference.”<sup>88</sup>) Gritsch and Jenson explain that both Luther and Melancthon used the word *adiaphora* to name those things that are “not necessary” to be done. But the word led to difficulty because people could ask “not necessary” for what? They describe the difficulty in this way:

“Not necessary for the doer’s salvation” cannot be the sense, even though it often seems to be. Nothing is necessary to be done by us for salvation, so that if this were the sense, *all* our acts would be *adiaphora* and the concept would be emptied.<sup>89</sup>

Gritsch and Jenson state clearly that we dare not take the concept of *adiaphora* and try to apply it as a “comprehensive expression of the reformation’s concern for Christian liberty.”<sup>90</sup> They are concerned that when that kind of interpretation is made it is an easy jump to cheapening it all by saying, “Only believe, and for the rest it does not matter what you do.”<sup>91</sup> They go on to lament that, “[to] the considerable damage of the Lutheran movement, many of its opponents. . . have misunderstood the matter in this way.”<sup>92</sup> In contrast to a misunderstanding that says as long as you believe it does not matter what you do, a question has emerged among some Lutherans as a playful yet serious way of articulating a grace-centered theology: “Now that you

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<sup>88</sup> Gritsch and Jenson, 194.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 201. Emphasis of *all* is Gritsch and Jenson’s.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



don't have to do anything, what are you going to do?"<sup>93</sup> We could also rightfully ask, "Since it is all gift, how are we going to now live responsively to this giftedness?"

### Summary

In her chapter "Practicing Christians: Prayer as Formation" in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, Stortz asserts that "people. . . both need and desire concrete ways of responding to divine initiative."<sup>94</sup> The purpose of this project was to take seriously Stortz's question, "How might Christians respond deliberately to God's initiating action?"<sup>95</sup> Stortz recognizes that in response to the historical concerns over "works-righteousness" discussed above, the Lutheran church has not traditionally given as much attention to formation or practices of faith as it has to doctrine. She writes, "Traditionally, Christian ethicists have turned to doctrines of faith and not its practices for their foundational insights into Lutheran ethics."<sup>96</sup> However, Stortz also points out that though it is often *missed* or diminished because of the works-righteousness controversy, Luther did speak and write avidly of the importance of instruction and formation in what it means to live faithful to one's baptismal calling. Stortz laments, ". . . [T]hey miss another dimension of Luther's language that speaks of practices and formation."<sup>97</sup> Both of his catechisms are examples of the importance Luther placed on praying the Decalogue, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, not as a

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<sup>93</sup> Lecture by Dr. Gerard Forde of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, in a course on The Third Article of the Creed (1979-80) as reported by Rev. Edwin McGee III.

<sup>94</sup> Stortz, *Lutheran Ethics*, 59.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. Stortz's emphasis.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

work toward salvation or union or spiritual progress and growth, but as a way of responding to God's gracious initiating action.

Though the word "practice" may not have been defined by Luther in the same intentional way it is defined in *Practicing our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass, or by Stortz in "Practicing Christians", in actuality, Luther taught people to pray the catechism as a way of practicing grace-centered faith. In fact, he says as much straightforwardly in his explanation to the Second Commandment in the *Large Catechism*. "See, with simple and playful methods like this we should bring up young people in the fear and honor of God so that the First and Second Commandments may become familiar and constantly be *practiced*."<sup>98</sup> The fruit of this practice, writes Luther, is that "this kind of training takes root in their hearts so that they fear God more than they do rods and clubs."<sup>99</sup> As we have noted, Luther practiced this kind of training himself.

There are many wonderful ways of practicing the faith as described in *Practicing Our Faith* edited by Dorothy Bass (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* by Marjorie Thompson (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995) and in *The Practice of Prayer* by Margaret Guenther (Cowley Publications, 1998) to cite just a few examples. We turn now in Chapter 3 to the specific practice of spiritual reading, paying particular attention to Luther's own practice of spiritual reading and specifically his reading (or praying) of

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<sup>98</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 396. My emphasis.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

**the catechism. Additionally, we will review the wider ecumenical tradition of spiritual reading as a rich resource for today's practicing Christians.**

## CHAPTER 3

### SPIRITUAL READING AND LUTHER'S PRACTICE OF PRAYER

#### Luther's Catechisms as Devotional Material

Though during Luther's lifetime many people did not know how to read, Luther did not consider illiteracy a barrier to a rich prayer life. He knew that whether the laity could read or not, they were generally in the practice of committing the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Hail Mary to memory. The first three of these, Luther claimed, were all that were needed for meaningful prayer. While illiteracy did not alarm Luther, the questionable theology handed down to the people through the devotional books prevalent in his day alarmed him very much.

Luther saw the traditional Roman prayer books as misleading and falsely assuring the laity that they could gain forgiveness through devotional diligence. He knew the people he served well enough to know it would serve little purpose to simply argue against the false claims of these traditional prayer books. It seemed more useful for him to publish his own devotional books as an alternative. Luther's early effort to provide an alternative devotional resource was published as his *Personal Prayer Book* (1522). This resource was received well and gained immediate popularity with nine editions appearing between 1522 and 1530.<sup>1</sup> These were eventually replaced by his *Small Catechism* (1529), which has long been utilized

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), in Devotional Writings: II, vol. 43 of Luther's Works, 7.

among Lutherans as a resource for catechetical instruction and more recently encouraged as a component of adult devotional material.<sup>2</sup>

Luther's interest in devotional writings was sustained throughout his career as is evidenced in part by a treatise written some thirteen years later than his early prayer books. In this brief and now celebrated treatise, "A Simple Way to Pray, for a Good Friend" (1535), Luther answers a question asked by one of his longest-standing and closest friends, Peter, his barber. Peter asked Luther to provide "a simple way to pray that an ordinary man could use."<sup>3</sup> Luther responded by writing a thirty-four-page book and dedicating it "to a good friend. . . for Peter, the master barber."<sup>4</sup> In this book Luther described how he prayed, though he first qualifies it by adding that he hopes God would show Peter an even better way. Luther writes, "Dear Master Peter: I will tell you as best I can what I do personally when I pray. May our dear Lord grant to you and to everybody to do it better than I!"<sup>5</sup> This treatise has recently been published as an attractive, hardback, palm-size edition giving this sixteenth-century document increased attention and accessibility among a modern ecumenical readership.<sup>6</sup>

In this simple prayer guide of 1535, Luther follows much the same thought that carried through his earlier *Small* and *Large Catechisms* (1529). In all three of

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<sup>2</sup> See Don Johnson, *Praying the Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," in *Devotional Writings II*, vol. 43 of *Luther's Works*, 193.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray Martin Luther*, foreward by Marjorie J. Thompson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000).

these devotional resources, concern for theology, biblical study and diligence to prayer are dealt with almost as if they are of one cloth. Luther had no sense of the kind of dualism that could identify theology and biblical study as activities of the mind while naming prayer an action of the heart. For Luther, prayer itself necessitated careful systematic clarity.<sup>7</sup> He wrote his earlier catechisms to teach the faith and at the same time to give people frameworks for theologically and biblically rich prayer. “A Simple Way to Pray” pointed Peter and all who read it back to the practice of praying the catechism—the practice, Luther noted, that he personally followed. The catechisms taught the basics. Prayer involved meditating on the basics not only as a means of accessing accurate information about the faith, but also because the Scriptures were means through which the Holy Spirit preached. Luther taught that even if the reader was in the middle of praying the Lord’s Prayer or halfway through the Ten Commandments, when it seemed that the Spirit was beginning to preach one could do no better than to stop, be still, and listen.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years a primary motivation behind Luther’s efforts to develop devotional material continued to be his concern that insufficiency and inaccuracy in the teaching of the faith was having disastrous effects on the laity. This concern had emerged in his earlier reaction to the traditional Roman prayer books, and was later substantiated and legitimized by the findings of an organized visitation of theologians to the Saxony churches in 1527. This visitation was organized in response to the concern that the reforms of the Reformation were not filtering into congregational

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<sup>7</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 383.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, “A Simple Way to Pray,” vol. 43 of *Luther’s Works*, 198, 201.

life. Few clergy seemed to understand the import of the Reformation doctrine for pastoral work. There seemed also to be an interpretation in some places that the liberation of the new movement meant liberation from supporting the church and its clergy altogether. Much leadership was needed during these early days of the Reformation church. In 1525 Luther sought out elector John of Saxony hoping he would give this crisis his attention. The Elector asked Luther to recommend a plan. Luther's suggestion was that a formal visitation to the parish churches be organized to ascertain a clear picture of the reality of parish life. Finally in 1527 a team of four visitors was sent to examine the situation, two members to evaluate the economic realities of the parish and two to examine the doctrines and teachings. The guidelines these teams utilized were written by Philip Melanchthon entitled *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*. [However, though Melanchthon is the original author, since Luther's ideas underlie the whole, some passages reflect his pen, and he wrote both the preface and revisions for later editions, the *Instructions* are included in the works of Luther.<sup>9</sup>] The information gathered from these visits reinforced and deepened the earlier suspected concerns. The disconcerting conclusion was that the clergy were not teaching the basics of the faith properly and that the laity knew and understood far less than was hoped.

Luther responded to this disturbing information by returning to an earlier emphasis on the basics of the Christian faith through a season of catechetical preaching in the church in Wittenberg. It was these catechetical sermons that were

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<sup>9</sup> Luther, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony," in *Church and Ministry: II*, vol. 40 of *Luther's Works*, 265.

compiled to form Luther's *Small and Large Catechisms* (1529). These sermons, and the catechisms that were developed from them, were concerned with right theology, but were driven by a pastoral urgency and perspective rather than by a primarily academic concern. As Luther points out in his preface to the *Large Catechism*, he originally designed his catechisms for the purpose of instructing young people and the uneducated so that they would "be led into the Scriptures and make progress everyday."<sup>10</sup>

The *Small Catechism* was developed originally as a "Handbook" for "Ordinary Pastors and Preachers."<sup>11</sup> The *Small Catechism* is intentionally simple and brief for the purpose of basic instruction in the Christian faith. It includes prayers and Bible passages concerned for the household and the daily life of the Christian. Luther uses the word catechism in general to mean "a brief digest and summary of the entire Holy Scriptures."<sup>12</sup>

The material Luther used for his *Large Catechism* drew greater detail from these sermons that he gave on the basic teachings of the Christian faith. In his preface to the *Large Catechism*, Luther points out that from ancient times the word "catechism" referred to "instruction for children" and "contained what every Christian should know."<sup>13</sup> Contrary to what some might assume, the *Small Catechism* is not intended exclusively for children and the *Large Catechism* for

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., "Editor's Introduction to the *Small Catechism*" in *Book of Concord*, 345.

<sup>12</sup> Luther, "Preface to the *Large Catechism*" in *Book of Concord*, 382.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 383.



adults. Both catechisms are actually for both young people and adults as well as for their pastors and preachers whose task is to teach the basics of the faith. Both catechisms follow the same pattern of a question-and-answer format. A commandment or petition or article is named. The question is asked, “Was ist das?” in the original German (“What is this?”) Occasionally the question would broaden to “What does this mean?” An answer is given. An obvious difference between the *Large Catechism* and the *Small Catechism* is length and detail of answer. For instance, the *Small Catechism* answers the question of what the First Commandment means in one sentence: “You are to fear and love God above all else.” The *Large Catechism* elaborates on the question for six pages. The *Large Catechism*, originally entitled German Catechism, gives more detailed instruction in the Christian faith than the *Small Catechism*, but it does so on the same basics of the faith: the Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Attention is also given to Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and Confession in both catechisms.

Luther’s hope that people would be “led into Scripture and make progress every day” through a faithful use of the catechism would have assumed an understanding that progress was not the work of people, but of the Holy Spirit. As he wrote in his *Small Catechism*, Luther was certain that “by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him,”<sup>14</sup> For Luther, progress did not have to do with human effort or strength, but with the Spirit’s work of calling through the gospel. One of Luther’s central theological understandings is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 355.

communicated in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the *Small Catechism* where he makes clear that the gospel is the means through which the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church.<sup>15</sup> For Luther, progress in the faith cannot be separated from this calling work of the Spirit through the Gospel.

Luther had preached on this earlier in one of his better-known sermons, “Two Kinds of Righteousness”(1519). The “first” or “alien” righteousness Luther speaks of is called *alien* and *first* because it is “the righteousness of another instilled from without.”<sup>16</sup> By alien righteousness Luther means the Word that comes from outside the person saying to the soul, “I am yours.”<sup>17</sup> This alien righteousness is God's doing. The second kind of righteousness is related to the alien (first) righteousness in that the second righteousness is an answer back in response to the first. The alien righteousness comes from outside and says, “I am yours” and the second righteousness answers back, “and I am yours.” Of particular note is that for Luther even this answering back that the soul does is done through the help of the first alien righteousness. We do not respond on our own without help. This help is grace. Progress, then, or growth, is not our mustering up our own improving, but it is grace working within us over time. It is a life long journey. “For,” Luther teaches, “alien

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<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 355.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, 299.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.”<sup>18</sup>

This understanding of grace working within us is important to this project’s exploration of the practice of grace-centered faith. Prayer and meditation are ways of saying, “I am yours” to the one who has not only already promised to be this for us and who also gives us the grace to respond in kind with “and I am yours.” These practices are entered into as response to a gift already granted, to a door already opened. An attitude of response and receptivity is fundamental to grace-centered prayer. When we have this clear—that it is grace already given, and even any growth or progress is growth in openness and receptivity to grace—then, and only then, from a grace-centered perspective, can we talk about spiritual practice.

Luther places this theology in the context of baptism explaining that it is given to people in “baptism and whenever they are truly repentant.”<sup>19</sup> Baptism is the mark of our reception into this grace. Lutherans and many other Christians, including Roman Catholics, baptize infants in order to point clearly to God as the initiator of this dynamic of grace in which we live. Luther insists that it is Christ who is the driving force, though we are involved through faith. It is a matter of faith in what God is doing even without our knowing because God is free to be true to God’s promises regardless of whether we merit such promises. Luther wrote in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will* (1526) that “this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered.”<sup>20</sup> It may seem like bad news that God’s will cannot be hindered. But it would be worse news to think that the evil in the world or in our own hearts can hinder God’s promises. In face of the terror in our world and the terror within our own hearts, it is consolation indeed to be able to trust that “God does not lie”<sup>21</sup> and that God’s “goodness faileth never.”<sup>22</sup> We can choose to not trust God’s goodness, but even an unwillingness to trust (believe) cannot prevent God from being good.<sup>23</sup> God is free and “God’s freedom is precisely the freedom of grace.”<sup>24</sup> That is supremely good news, according to Luther. For Luther, it is only when it is understood that God first comes from without saying “I am yours”<sup>25</sup> and we respond back through the gift of faith saying “I am yours” by grace alone, that we can begin to talk about “the manner of life spent profitably in good works.”<sup>26</sup> Only then do we pray the catechism as a practice of grace-centered faith, for the catechism is important not in showing us what we can do, but in showing us what God can do in us by grace. Praying the catechism is entered into as a practice of *grace-centered* faith or it need not be entered into at all. It begins and ends in trust of God’s promises or it counts for nothing.

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<sup>20</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 of *Luther’s Works*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978) Hymn #456.

<sup>23</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 of *Luther’s Works*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” vol. 31 of *Luther’s Works*, 300.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 299.

### Luther on Praying the Catechism

According to Luther, the sole purpose of devotional writings was to inspire a move toward the more important reading of Holy Scripture. Specifically in the case of the catechisms, their purpose was to support a deeper reflection on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and other theological writings as sacred text. For Luther, the greatest tragedy would not have been that his writings might someday be lost. In response to repeated pressure during the later years of his life for him to give permission for the publication of a complete edition of his writings, Luther finally agreed but took pains to explain his sentiments in his preface to the Wittenberg Edition of his writings. He wrote, "I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all, remain in obscurity and go by the board."<sup>27</sup> As far as Luther was concerned, the function of any writing outside of scripture was "to lead the way into and point toward the Scripture as John the Baptist did towards Christ, saying, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' (John 3:30)"<sup>28</sup> It is noteworthy that Luther made a "friendly request" of all who would read his books, that his books not be allowed to hinder them "from studying the Scriptures themselves."<sup>29</sup> Luther's "friendly request" applies also to his catechisms. Their purpose was not to draw away from the study of the Bible, but to point people toward it and assist people in approaching it with receptive hearts.

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<sup>27</sup> Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings," vol. 34 of *Luther's Works*, 283.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Luther prayed by praying the catechism daily. He passionately describes his commitment to this process in his preface to the *Large Catechism*. He begins by pointing out, not to boast, but rather to make his point, that he is “a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty.”<sup>30</sup> “Nevertheless,” he explains, “each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc.” His point is that even he “must still read and study the catechism daily” and yet he admits that, educated and experienced as he is, he too cannot master it as he wishes. He too “must remain a child and pupil of the catechism”. Luther then adds emphasis by pointing to the attitude with which he does this: “and I also do so gladly.”<sup>31</sup>

Luther further explains why meditating on the catechism is of such great value and why the dangers of neglecting it are so grave. He insists that “[w]ithout doubt, you will offer up no more powerful incense or savor against the devil than to occupy yourself with God’s commandments and words and to speak, sing, or think about them.”<sup>32</sup> Continuing, Luther adds a bit of ecclesial criticism regarding the practice in his day of seeking out “holy water” when he suggests of the catechism, “[T]his is the true holy water and sign that drives away the devil and puts him to flight.” That

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<sup>30</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 380.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 381

promise alone, according to Luther, should be enough to motivate us daily to “gladly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism.”<sup>33</sup>

Luther becomes personal and picturesque in describing his frustration with those who do not want to bother with such a simple, valuable commitment as meditating on the catechism. “If I were to tell all the benefits and advantages that God’s Word accomplishes, where would I find enough paper and time?”<sup>34</sup> He challenges those whose neglect of the catechism he sees as a flippant disregard of an incredible benefit and power. In typical Luther fashion, he foregoes all polite talk and asserts that if we continue in such flippancy toward the catechism, “we deserve not only to be given no food to eat, but also to have the dogs set upon us and to be pelted with horse manure.”<sup>35</sup> Luther’s earthy illustrations may make us laugh today, but they make clear the passion he felt toward this topic.

Of the Ten Commandments, Luther spoke in highest regard and with special interest. He writes that “those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to. . . make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters.”<sup>36</sup> Luther then demonstrates both his biblical acuity and his devotional sensitivity by asking a rhetorical question, a question that is central to this project’s focus and investigation: “[W]hat is the whole Psalter but meditation and exercises based on the First Commandment?”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 382

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

When Luther writes of the Ten Commandments in this way it is important to remember that he does so with his underlying grace-centered theological perspective. He writes specifically of his theological approach to the commandments in *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520). In teaching about the commandments Luther acknowledges that they “show us what we ought to do, but they do not give us the power to do it.”<sup>38</sup> Luther uses the commandments to point us to where we do get this power to do what we ought to do: “If you wish to fulfill the law. . . believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you.”<sup>39</sup> Luther is clear that Christian freedom is not found in the commandments, but the commandments help us see how fully dependent we are on the freedom we have in Christ.

#### Classic *Lectio Divina* and Luther’s Alternative Pattern

Luther’s way of praying the scriptures and praying the catechism (which includes scripture) had undoubtedly been influenced by the already centuries-old Benedictine tradition of *lectio divina*. Practices of praying the scripture were woven into the very fabric of early Christian devotional life. Much has been written on *lectio divina* so we will not extensively cover that practice here. Those interested in a detailed history and practice of *lectio divina* may be especially helped by Thelma Hall’s *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*. Briefly for our purposes here, *lectio divina* is a Latin phrase from the fourth and fifth centuries most often associated with the spirituality of ancient monastic life. Translated literally *lectio*

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<sup>38</sup> Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, vol. 31 of *Luther’s Works*, 348.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



*divina* means “divine reading” or “sacred reading”. From its origins it has been assumed that the primary source of *lectio divina* is Holy Scripture. Secondly, it has come also to refer to reading the writings of the early spiritual writers. In more contemporary years however, *lectio divina* has been recognized more broadly to include the practice of reading with the express purpose of cultivating friendship with God. Contemporary understanding focuses more on the intent of the reader than on the specific material being read whether it is the Bible, poetry, a novel, a spirituality book, or any other reading. Gabriel O’Donnell, O.P., a Dominican priest and Professor of Spiritual Theology and Liturgy at the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C., notes:

Some distinctions are necessary here, however, since to read a book about God or the life of prayer is not necessarily to practice *lectio divina*. . . . Lectio is a disciplined form of devotion and not a method of Bible Study. . . . *Lectio divina* is a form of reading that leads to prayer.<sup>40</sup>

During his years as an Augustinian monk Luther would have had daily opportunity to hear the scriptures spoken and sung through the corporate worship life of the monastery. The monks would have gathered at regularly set hours for prayer and worship in which the reading of the Psalms would have had central place. Luther’s experience in the monastery, however, was that the Psalms were not interpreted to point to Christ and the consolation and help he brings, but rather were interpreted to instill a fear of God.

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<sup>40</sup> Gabriel O’Donnell, “Reading for Holiness: *Lectio Divina*,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, ed. Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 46-47.

Having been advised by his superiors to study both theology and Bible, Luther brought this experience of the use of scripture in worship with him to his scholastic endeavors. He was passionate about studying the Bible and found in it a personal address from God that his life as a monk had not taught him to expect or seek. (For greater detail related to Luther's spiritual history the reader may wish to refer back to Chapter 2 of this paper.) What is significant for the focus of this chapter is the relationship between Luther's study of the Bible and his devotional life of prayer. For Luther, a correct study of the Bible approached it as a Word from God that set one free. As he came to experience it through his own existential encounter, Bible study was not just an intellectual exercise, but was a means through which God encountered and addressed humanity in daily life. Bible study itself became devotional practice and prayer. Luther came to believe that God did not speak without the Word, but spoke through the Word as the reader engaged it in such a way as to crack it open as one cracks open a bowl of nuts to get at their "sweet kernels."<sup>41</sup> For Luther, prayer was the engagement of the Word through meditation on it and meditation on it made one aware of how much they need the Word, so, consequently, prayer as meditation on the Word continually draws the one who prays back into the Word. Prayer deepens an awareness of our dependence on the Word for our very life. This was a different pattern than what Luther had inherited from the church and devotional resources of his early years, from his days in the monastery, and from the

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<sup>41</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 84.

early training he received from his scholastic education at the university. Luther had moved, in terms of biblical prayer, to a place of his own.

The common practice of Christian contemplative prayer in the Middle Ages followed the movement from *lectio* (reading) to *oratio* (prayer) to *meditatio* (meditating), and finally to *contemplatio* (contemplation).<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther struggled with the way contemplation seemed often turned into a work through which one tried to make one's self right with God or closer to God. But more subtly problematic for Luther was the teaching that the goal of prayer was itself contemplation or union with God outside of an encounter with the Word. Luther would have been well aware of the traditional pattern of *lectio, oratio, meditatio, contemplatio*, but he offered a radical shift from that tradition in his presentation of a slightly, though significantly altered pattern.<sup>43</sup> In his preface to the Wittenberg Edition of his German writings, Luther teaches that the Psalms present a different pattern than that taught in the Middle Ages. Luther claims that three rules are presented throughout the whole of the Psalter, namely *oratio, meditatio, and tentatio* (suffering).<sup>44</sup> This pattern differs from the pattern Luther had inherited in that, in Luther's interpretation, prayer leads us to meditation on the scriptures rather than meditation leading to prayer and subsequently to contemplation. Rather than the twelfth-century understanding of the reading of scripture leading to prayer and meditation for the purpose of contemplation, Luther saw the goal of prayer being to continually return us to the

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<sup>42</sup> Stortz, "Practicing Christians," 64.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings," vol. 34 of *Luther's Works*, 285.

Word—the God-given source of consolation and hope. Luther points specifically to Psalm 119 as the place where this pattern is established. There the Psalmist instructs us to read and reread the words of scripture “with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them.”<sup>45</sup> Luther interprets the Psalmist to mean that meditating on the Word is an end in itself, or the end to which prayer leads rather than as an important step along the way to contemplation and union with God.

Drawing from the call in Psalm 119 to “talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God’s Word and commandments,” Luther emerges with such a high regard for the Word that he claims, “For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word.”<sup>46</sup> It is noteworthy that the editors of the preface to the Wittenberg Edition point out that the rich understanding of the study of the “outward form of the Bible (eusserlich) and the external (eusserlich) Word as a medium of God’s address cannot be rendered in idiomatic English by translating eusserlich as one word.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the external Word upon which we meditate is at once also the medium of God’s living address to us. Perhaps one might think it would be helpful to have two words here for Word, but that too would be confusing because it is the external Word that the Living Word speaks through to the heart. It is not two separate things, but one operating through or residing in the other.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

For Luther it was important to emphasize that we do not end prayer turned inwardly in contemplation. Contemplation in and of itself is not the goal. Rather, it is better, Luther concludes, for our prayer pattern to move from contemplation to *tentatio* (suffering) so that we are pointed back to the Word, which alone sustains one who suffers—who truly hungers and thirsts. One may think here of Psalm 42:1: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” For Luther, the end of prayer was to always be pointed back with longing into the Word of God as our life and salvation. To that end it made sense for Luther that the final step in the pattern of prayer be *tentatio* (suffering) because it kept alive the longing, hungering, thirsting for the Word. It is the Word alone that sustains, guides, nourishes, replenishes, brings peace, and protects from all evil. This high regard for meditation on the Word as the heart and substance of prayer may be one of the often missed perspectives Luther scholarship could add to the dialogue within the ecumenical field of spirituality.

Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., an internationally recognized authority on the history of Christian spirituality in the Middle Ages, points out that the dominant interpretation of the centuries that preceded Luther, and therefore the interpretation Luther would have inherited was that “contemplation that consists of resting in God is the highest of all activities.”<sup>48</sup> Leclercq teaches further that one of the contributions of twelfth century spiritual sage Thomas Aquinas was that of interpreting contemplation

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Leclercq, “Action and Contemplation: Two Ways Toward the Ultimate Reality,” in *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. E. Glenn Hinson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 72.

as “of higher dignity because it is a limited anticipation of the future human state, of the final and beatific union with God.”<sup>49</sup> In contrast to this, Luther offers an alternative view that affords meditation on the Word the place of highest regard. As he writes in his preface to the *Large Catechism*, the “Word of God is not like some idle tale, but as St. Paul says in Romans 1:16, it is ‘the power of God,’ indeed, the power of God that burns the devil’s house down and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help.”<sup>50</sup> It is the Word alone that is the “master of a hundred thousand arts” which we need as surely as we need our daily bread.<sup>51</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a twentieth-century German Lutheran pastor, scholar, writer and martyr writes of this primacy of the Word in prayer in his book Psalms: the Prayer Book of the Bible. He states that “it is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer.”<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer insists emphatically that prayer “does not mean simply to pour out one’s heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with him, whether the heart is full or empty.”<sup>53</sup> Bonhoeffer asserts that we are to expect something of the Word (and, the writer of this project may add, even if it is the Ten Commandments that is the Word before us). Bonhoeffer emphasizes this as well in his book Life Together noting that “[i]n our meditation we ponder the chosen text

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>50</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 382.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>52</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day. . . . We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally.”<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer’s understanding of God’s Word is that in meditation the Word “strives to stir us, to work and operate in us, so that we shall not get away from it the whole day long. Then it will do its work in us, often without our being conscious of it.”<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer directly follows in Luther’s line of thinking when he asserts that “the most promising method of prayer is to allow oneself to be guided by the word of the Scriptures. . . . In this way we shall not become the victims of our own emptiness.”<sup>56</sup> He goes on to claim that “[p]rayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, and, what is more, to accept it in one’s personal situation.”<sup>57</sup>

M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, devotes an entire chapter of his book *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* to comparing the difference between informational reading and formational reading.<sup>58</sup> Mulholland elaborates on six characteristics of informational reading and then six characteristics of formational reading. To elaborate on the differences between

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<sup>54</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 82.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> See Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1985).

informational and formational reading excerpts from Mulholland's descriptions are briefly summarized below:<sup>59</sup>

#### **Characteristics of Formational Reading**

- (1) You are not concerned about the amount of reading you cover.
- (2) Formational reading is in-depth rather than linear.
- (3) Formational reading is to "allow the text to master you" rather than you master it.
- (4) In formational reading "we willingly stand ourselves before the text and await its address."
- (5) Formational reading requires a "willing pliability" instead of an "analytical approach."
- (6) Formational reading is not problem solving, but "openness to mystery."

#### **Characteristics of Informational Reading**

- (1) Informational reading seeks to cover "as much as possible as quickly as possible."
- (2) Informational reading is linear.
- (3) Informational reading seeks to master the text.
- (4) In informational reading the text is an object "out there" for us to control.
- (5) Informational reading is analytical, critical and judgmental.
- (6) Informational reading is characterized by a "problem solving mentality."

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 47–60.



Mulholland acknowledges that both formational and informational reading are valid and important, but that we have to be intentional about the difference.

“Informational-functional dynamics are so deeply ingrained in the whole fabric of our culture that they have become one of those binding and/or blinding perceptions which take over automatically whenever we open a book.”<sup>60</sup>

Thomas Merton, late Trappist monk and author of many books on spirituality, writes similarly of the need for balancing the two approaches. He recognizes that informational reading is important as “preliminary unraveling of the meaning of the text.” But there is also “a deeper level, a living insight which grows out of personal involvement and relatedness.”<sup>61</sup> Merton wrote *Opening the Bible* in recognition that while the majority of readers are familiar with how to approach the “preliminary unraveling” level, they often miss this deeper level. This awareness was also on Luther’s pastoral heart. He was motivated by a pastoral urgency to help his people move to this deeper level of engagement with the texts of scripture, beginning with the catechism.

It is this deeper level, which, as Thompson describes, “requires unhurried time and an open heart”<sup>62</sup> that is the primary interest of this project. The informational level is secondary, though we acknowledge that the “preliminary unraveling of the text”<sup>63</sup> is an important place to begin. For this project, what is primary is the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1970), 61.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> Merton, *Opening the Bible*, 61.

intention set forth by the tradition of *lectio divina*. Within that tradition Macrina Wiederkehr, O.S.B., a member of St. Scholastica Monastery, Fort Smith, Arkansas, recognizes that “we do not always realize what a radical suggestion it is for us to read to be formed and transformed rather than to gather information.” She acknowledges that it is “not easy for us to stop reading when the heart is touched.”<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps most important in understanding the intentions of spiritual reading is that, as Thompson points out, “[i]n a certain sense, when we are engaged in spiritual reading it is not so much we who read the Word as the Word who ‘reads us!’”<sup>65</sup> This is, throughout, the work of the Holy Spirit and as Luther writes in “A Simple Way to Pray,” when the Spirit wishes to speak we ought to “honor him by letting go. . . be still and listen to him who can do better than we can.”<sup>66</sup>

### Summary and a Biblical Illustration

In a chapter entitled “Along the Desert Road: Notes on Spiritual Reading,” John Mogabgab, an Episcopal layperson and editor of the award-winning journal *Weavings*, points to the New Testament story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) as a helpful image of how spiritual reading relates to the journey of faith.<sup>67</sup> The Ethiopian was riding in his chariot on his way home from a Jerusalem pilgrimage when he started to read out loud from the book of Isaiah. The Acts reading tells us

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<sup>64</sup> Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 53.

<sup>65</sup> Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 20

<sup>66</sup> Luther, “A Simple Way to Pray,” vol. 43 of *Luther’s Works*, 201.

<sup>67</sup> John S. Mogabgab, “Along the Desert Road: Notes on Spiritual Reading,” in *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. E. Glenn Hinson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). 179-83.

that meanwhile the angel of the Lord had spoken to Philip telling him to go and meet the chariot. Philip did so and when he heard the Ethiopian reading aloud from Isaiah, Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian responded, “How can I unless I have someone to guide me?” He then invited Philip to sit by his side in the chariot and teach him. Philip proceeded to tell him of Jesus and the Ethiopian asked to be baptized.

The spiritual awakening for this Ethiopian began as he sat in his chariot reading scripture, not for information alone, but because of his hunger. He took his yearning into his reading. Similarly, Martin Luther took his restless soul into his reading and study of the Bible. It was while Luther was engaged, much like the Ethiopian, in a study of scripture that a whole new world opened up for him. The scripture assured him that “we are justified by our faith.”<sup>68</sup> Luther writes of this objective power of the word in his preface to his *Large Catechism* stating, “When we seriously ponder the word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion . . . .”<sup>69</sup>

Luther’s catechisms exert a strong call to diligence in the practice of faith, not as a project to improve our spirituality, but as a response to God who has already done “all things well” on our behalf in Christ. All is gift and grace, Luther asserts. God’s freedom is the freedom of grace to transform us so we can fulfill the very

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<sup>68</sup> Rom. 1:17b

<sup>69</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 379.

command we cannot fulfill except that grace transforms us to be able to do so.<sup>70</sup>

Diligence has more to do with grace than with anything. It has to do with responding in trust to God's freedom to be a gracious and good God who is not in any way held down to schemes of merit or systems of reward.<sup>71</sup> God's goodness is paramount for Luther, and because it is, he advocated for a practice of daily meditation on the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed, in order that we might live in and be responsive to that goodness. Is such meditation on the catechism relevant today? If it is, is Luther's *Large Catechism* a resource that should be brought back into fuller use as we delve into the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments? It is these questions, to which we now turn in Chapter 4, that were the focus of the research for this project.

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<sup>70</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

#### Process and Design

The approach of investigation for this project began by identifying a sample of active Christians who were both strangely curious about Luther's *Large Catechism* and interested in their own growth in the practice of grace-centered faith. Their curiosity and interest needed to be accompanied by both availability of time for study and a willingness to participate in a volunteer research endeavor with the *Large Catechism*. Conversations were had and phone calls made to about forty people I know who I thought might be open to such an adventure. Out of these invitational conversations, twenty-eight were able to complete the response form for this project within the allotted time.

It is noteworthy that the verbal invitations to participate in this exploration were extended in September and October of 2001, corresponding closely with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This may have heightened interest in turning to a resource reflecting on the Ten Commandments as they address life's fundamental questions. A few of the participants stated as much. The packet of reading material and questionnaires was mailed early in December of 2001 requesting that the responses be returned by mid January 2002. This time line allowed participants five to six weeks to prepare responses. The due date was extended to mid February of 2002 for several participants upon their request.

While Luther's *Large Catechism* is a document of the Lutheran Confessions and the majority of the participants are members of congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, there was an intentional effort to include participants of traditions other than Lutheran. Other religious backgrounds and affiliations of those who accepted the invitation to participate included Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ, Metropolitan Community Church, Episcopalian, the Congregational Church, and no affiliation. The majority of the respondents were residing in Southern California; however at the time of invitation one was residing in Florida, one in Maryland, one in New Mexico, one in Northern California, and two in Washington State. The process did not require the participants to be able to meet together as the design led them through an individual process.

When an acceptable number of participants were identified a letter was sent to each who had expressed interest and availability. The letter described the process, outlined the steps, and detailed the desired time line, including the date by which their responses were needed. Included in the mailing was a copy of Chapter 3 of this paper with the encouragement that all participants read it so that they would share a common understanding of the approach and intent of spiritual reading. Also included was a Xeroxed copy of the Ten Commandment portion of Luther's *Large Catechism* as printed in the 2000 edition of the *Book of Concord*. The mailing also included the six-step Response Form for Volunteer Participants (see Appendix B) and a stamped and addressed envelope in which to return their responses to me. Luther's numbering

of the Commandments was utilized as listed in the preface to his *Large Catechism* (See Appendix A).

Participants were asked to read Chapter 3 of this project (“Spiritual Reading and Luther’s Practice of Prayer”) or another resource that introduces the contours and intentions of sacred reading as a practice in which the purpose of reading is for prayer and formation rather than for information gathering. With that background, participants were asked to select any one of the Ten Commandments, except the First Commandment, as their focus for this experimentation. All participants were asked to also reflect on the First Commandment—“You are to have no other gods”—in addition to the one they selected. In selecting a commandment, participants were asked to consider which commandment they would like to deepen reflection on in terms of their life of faith and engagement with the world. In other words, their selection was to be based on which commandment seemed most to catch their attention related to their lives or related to what is happening in the world.

In both the letter and on the Response Form for Volunteer Participants the respondents were reminded that the primary intention was not so much to glean factual information from what Luther wrote as to assess whether or not his offerings served formational reading as a springboard for their own meditation and reflections. It was acknowledged that because Luther’s use of language and his worldview would reflect the sixteenth- century, participants undoubtedly would find aspects of his writing to be archaic or off-putting. What was of interest for this study wasn’t a listing of all that was archaic but rather thoughtful reflection on what was left after

they moved past or set aside what was outdated and off-putting. In other words, participants were to consider what was of value as spiritual reading for today after they moved past what was archaic and out of sync. One basic question was this: Did what was archaic in the *Large Catechism* hinder its usefulness for today as spiritual reading, or could participants set aside what was outdated and still find a meaningful resource? Additionally, if they were to take the commandment as seriously as Luther did, in their understanding, what might God be saying to them and to our world today? In other words, the participants were invited to meditate, reflect, and journal on the commandments with the intention of spiritual reading with Luther's *Large Catechism* as a springboard or starting place.

Participants were directed through six steps as described on the Response Form for Volunteer Participants (see Appendix B). Step 1 asked participants to ponder which commandment, other than the First Commandment, seemed most to catch their attention in relationship to their life and what was going on in the world. In other words, their work would be limited to two commandments, the First and one other of their choosing. Their choice was to be based on which commandment, in addition to the First, drew their interest for deep, prayerful reflection in relation to their faith and life. Step 1 was to select a commandment for reflection.

Step 2 asked them to read Chapter 3 of this paper, "Spiritual Reading and Luther's Practice of Prayer," or another resource that introduced them to the contours and intentions of spiritual reading as a practice of moving from information to



formation. The intent was to provide all participants with at least a basic understanding of the practice of spiritual reading.

Step 3 asked participants to do a preliminary reading of Luther's discussion of their selected commandment in the *Large Catechism*. They were reminded that Luther wrote this document in 1529 in Germany as a response to the realities and questions of his day with the particular blinders of his cultural milieu. It was acknowledged that the respondents should expect there to be notions and understandings in Luther's writing that would be archaic and perhaps even offensive. Respondents were encouraged to use the preliminary reading to move past what they found to be off-putting and out of sync with today. The hope was that by the second reading they would be able to focus on any relevant and meaningful material that remained.

Step 4 asked respondents to read Luther's reflections a second time with the attitude of moving from information to formation as detailed in Chapter 3. They were asked to journal about concepts or phrases that held meaning for them and invited to reflect further on the commandment they selected.

Step 5 reminded participants that Luther taught that if one fulfills the First Commandment the other commandments are fulfilled as well. In this step the respondents were asked to read Luther's comments on the First Commandment paying attention to how their selected commandment related to it. Respondents were asked to comment on how they found their selected commandment fulfilled in a proper observance of the First Commandment. (In his explanation to the First

Commandment Luther included a section he titled “Explanation of the Appendix to the First Commandment.” To honor the constraints of time and the narrow focus of this investigation, this latter section was not included in the packet to the respondents nor were they requested to read it.)

Step 6 asked for responses to five questions. Participants were to respond on a Lickert scale which ranged from 1 to 5 with 1 being “very meaningful,” “very stimulating,” “serves well,” or “strongly recommend,” and 5 being “not meaningful,” “not stimulating,” “serves poorly,” or “strongly do not recommend.” Respondents were asked to graph their response to their reading of Luther. The journal and graphed responses were gathered from these forms, organized by commandment and typed for easy accessibility and review. (For the full texts of the journal entries and graphed responses, refer to Appendix D.)

In addition to these six steps, the Response Form for Volunteer Participants included the Demographic Information of Respondents. This form requested identification of religious affiliation including an identification of how many years they had held that affiliation. Of the twenty-eight respondents, twenty-one were affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, one was affiliated with Christian Congregationalists, two were affiliated with the United Church of Christ, one affiliated with the Episcopal Church—US, one was a member of the Metropolitan Community Church, one was a nonpracticing Roman Catholic, and one self-identified as not being able to give a denominational affiliation at this point in her life. The Demographic Information of Respondents also asked if participants had read the

*Large Catechism* previously. Four respondents, all clergy who had received their seminary training at Lutheran seminaries, had read the *Large Catechism* previously. The remaining twenty-four respondents had never read the *Large Catechism*. Twelve of the twenty-eight respondents were men. Sixteen were women. Twenty-one of the respondents identified themselves as Anglo/White, three as Latino, one as Puerto Rican, two as African American, and one as Asian American. Participants also indicated their educational level: high school (4), bachelor's degree (6), master's degree (16), doctoral degree (2).

Respondents' various occupations included administrative assistant, physical therapist, seminary student, clergy (5), teaching assistant (2), student (6), accountant, consultant/executive, writer/editor (2), teacher, secretary (2), homemaker, nurse, "God knows," nutritionist consultant, musical comedy star, parish coordinator, realtor, public school administrator, researchers (3). Age range: under 36 years of age (7), 36-55 years of age (13), 56 years of age and over (8). The Demographic Information of Respondents provided opportunity for respondents to add any other categories they wished to identify. Self-identifying categories: gay/lesbian (3), Green Party member (1).

Respondents were informed that the findings of the research would be reported blind so that their names would not be listed along with analysis of data. I am deeply grateful for each of these indeed strangely curious and spiritually probing souls who graciously accepted this unusual invitation to share in this dispersed

community of reflection. (For a summary of the demographics of the respondents, refer to Appendix C).

What was unusual about this particular exploration was that Luther's *Large Catechism* was used, rather than some other way of accessing the catechism, including his more familiar *Small Catechism*. Also unique was the emphasis that the *Large Catechism* be seen as a "springboard," a jumping-off point into deeper reflection on the Holy Scriptures as they come to us in the Ten Commandments. The purpose was not necessarily for the participants to analyze the historical/cultural issues on which Luther wrote but rather to engage his *Large Catechism* as catalyst for deepening their own meditation with those ancient yet timeless spiritual guides, the Ten Commandments. The goal was for participants to spend enough time with Luther's writing to sense whether or not his passion for connections between the commandments and his daily life and historical experience served as a springboard for their own meditation on the commandments in light of the questions facing their lives and our twenty-first century world.

#### Difficulties Identified Regarding the *Large Catechism*

The introduction to the Response Form for Volunteer Participants acknowledged that the respondents might experience this catechism from the year 1529 as off-putting and archaic. The respondents were not asked to list what they found to be out of sync, but rather were prepared for the likelihood that they would find some of it archaic, even perhaps offensive. Step 3 of the process asked them to "be aware of whatever is off-putting and out of sync with today so you can set it

aside.” Several respondents pointed to Luther’s choice of words, especially his use of gender-specific (male) language that, as one participant noted, “the translator has not gone out of the way to modernize.” Another writer commented that Luther would need to be approached with care because “holes” in his discussion “may lead us to misunderstand his intent.” The majority of the respondents did not identify aspects that concerned them as archaic, but noted some difficulties related to theological arguments that rubbed them the wrong way or surprised them. They seemed largely to expect Luther’s writing to be archaic related to inclusive language issues and historical/cultural illustrations and seemed markedly tolerant of those limitations. They seemed not, however, to expect his theology to contradict itself, as it seemed to do in several places.

The greatest difficulties identified by the participants were in his comments on the Fourth Commandment (“You are to honor father and mother”). Two of the respondents, both non-Lutherans, were disappointed that Luther did not offer more help for today in terms of child-parent relationships. They had hoped Luther would provide healthy insights and found instead that he reinforced the destructive pattern of blind obedience to even violent parents. The respondents acknowledged that Luther was writing from within his cultural milieu, but noted that modern research and experience has enlightened us to move beyond the naïve assumption that parents always know best and deserve honor. Concern was expressed that Luther’s comments could be dangerous if applied uncritically to today’s world. Of Luther’s explanation to the Fourth Commandment one respondent asserted, “There is very

little in this writing that invites formation.” A different respondent asserted in response to the same commandment, “I found the text beneficial from a spiritually formative experience.” Yet another respondent concludes that “there is much to learn from Luther’s explanation of the Fourth Commandment, but we may need to approach it with care because Luther does not discuss some matters that are important in our culture that may not have been in his.”

There were also some critical comments regarding Luther’s reflections on the Second Commandment (“You are not to take the name of God in vain”). Concern was expressed that Luther identified God’s wrath and punishment as resulting from people’s “willful contempt” toward the commandment. Luther’s description of God as a punishing God made several of the respondents “uneasy.” One respondent offered an alternative, simpler, possibility that “[f]ailure to ‘just say yes’ to God’s alien righteousness may mean that the kingdom of God cannot come just yet. It is held back. Thus it cannot obviate the bad stuff that happens on its own (without God directly causing it) or perhaps because of Satan.” Another person appreciated Luther’s repeated sense that “beatings and blows come to no good end,” but then wondered why he also so often advocated the rod. Respondents noted several times that Luther seemed to make contradictory comments and thus cause confusion for the reader. Some found themselves valuing an insight in one paragraph that Luther would then seem to contradict in a later paragraph. Some seemed to suggest that though Luther clearly represents a particular culture and time, he seemed also to be able to push past his culture’s wisdom, (i.e., the rod) to point to the better good that

could take root in the heart, not through the rod, but by teaching people to honor God as the commandments do.

One of the participants, in responding to the Eighth Commandment (“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”), noted feeling “very uncomfortable with Luther’s seemingly blanket call to “turn our ears into a tomb” so that what is secret remains secret. This respondent argued that there might be situations of drugs, terrorism, or abuse where “our co-creative responsibilities” obligate us to intervene. Another respondent found difficulties with Luther’s comments on the Seventh Commandment (“You are not to steal”) where Luther seems to imply that financial troubles were a punishment by God for theft. This long-term Lutheran respondent wrote that this “seems not only like bad theology but quite against what I thought Luther was all about.”

While these concerns about contradiction, timeliness, and divine wrath emerged, the preponderance of the journals focused on where they would carry the dialogue further rather than on noting what they found disagreeable in Luther. This emphasis may have been due to the recognition that the assignment did not ask for an evaluation of Luther’s thought but rather for reflection on whether and how his catechism served as a springboard, a jumping off point for their own further thinking. The overwhelming majority found that it did serve as a starting point for deepened reflection and meditation in the manner of spiritual reading and that what was archaic or offensive in it did not hinder them from using it in that way.

### Deepened Reflection on Contemporary Questions

In responding to the Eighth Commandment (“You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor”), one journalist wrote, “I found nothing ‘out of sync’ and/or ‘off-putting’ about this commandment. If anything it is even more relevant and important in our modern-day world with our communication explosion.” A different respondent to that same commandment crisply noted, “One need look no further than Tom Cruise (with persistent gossip about his orientation), President Clinton (and his many loves), or Magic Johnson’s HIV status (How did he get it? How many women did he sleep with?) to realize we are not only consumed with public gossip, but claim a democratic ‘right to know’ it.” This same respondent shared that as a Christian with a gay orientation he could not help but relate the Eighth Commandment to his experience of being labeled “a sinner” by other Christians. He admitted that his temptation was to judge those who labeled him. He was particularly challenged by Luther’s reminder that when we exploit other people’s sins, i.e., “tell others about it”, it can cause us to “fall into a greater sin than that of our neighbor.” Reflecting on the Second Commandment, but with a similar concern, a different respondent asks, “How do I know when I take God’s name in vain and when I don’t?” She suggests that some would never have thought they were taking God’s name in vain when they try to “communicate what God says, desires, honors, etc.”

Given that the invitation to participate in this exploration was extended in the weeks that immediately followed the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, it is not surprising that many participants made connections between the aftermath of that



experience and the commandments. Several of the respondents to the Second Commandment challenged the outpouring of “God bless America” jargon in the wake of the attacks. They reflected on whether this might not be a misuse of the holy name. There was a concern that attaching God’s name to America was being used as a way to justify whatever the United States does. Additional concern was noted regarding how the September 11<sup>th</sup> events were described by some as God’s withdrawal of favor from the United States in response to certain supposed sins. One of the respondents to the Fifth Commandment (“You are not to kill”) noted that Luther’s comments were “especially relevant in the post September 11<sup>th</sup> context.” Especially appreciated were Luther’s warnings to not demonize our enemies and his efforts to take the commandment “a step further by saying it isn’t just about killing,” but about “withholding love and care.”

Luther’s emphasis on the sins of omission was recognized as significant in bringing many of the commandments into daily life. Several respondents noted that it wasn’t just what we do but also what we fail to do that matters in observing the commandments. This was noted by the respondent to the Fifth Commandment who applauded Luther’s recognition that “[w]e are murderers if we do not feed the hungry or free the innocently condemned if we have the ability to do so.” In a similar way, it was appreciated that Luther’s focus on the Sixth Commandment (“You are not to commit adultery”) did not limit adultery to a physical act, but saw in the commandment a positive call to “love and cherish the spouse whom God . . . has given you.” One journalist asserted in response to the Sixth Commandment that she

honestly believed Luther “would have tolerated a same-sex relationship as long as it was based in love, mutual respect, and fidelity.” A respondent to the Ninth and Tenth Commandments appreciated Luther’s expansion of the commandment wherein he turns it around to include, along with not coveting, a concern for actively watching out for the neighbor’s need. (Luther responded to the Ninth and Tenth Commandments as one: “You are not to covet you neighbor’s house. You are not to covet his wife, male or female servants, cattle, or whatever is his.”) One participant drew connections between these “covet” commandments and historic and contemporary issues of property rights, corporation rights, and the American injustice toward indigenous peoples. What came to mind for this respondent while pondering Luther’s diatribe was how “good” people accept without question the “right” to possess land and destroy resources in the name of profit. This respondent recognized this as a deeply spiritual issue that connected faith to life. These and other similar kinds of reflection connecting the commandments to current events and contemporary questions were common among the journals.

What seemed to get the most response in the journals was the notion that clinging to false gods rather than clinging to God with the heart meant we were not living out the positive things the commandments call us to do. Of note in this neglect were the failure to give thanks and praise to God; to call upon God to give us all we need; and to protect our neighbor’s life, reputation, livelihood and relationships. It was this failure to observe this positive nature of the commandments that seemed most to cause respondents to recognize their own complicity in falling short of a

proper observance of the commandments. One of the respondents cleverly wrote, “I’m no kleptomaniac. I’m not on the lam from a bank heist. I haven’t even shoplifted a small item from a grocery store (i.e., eating grapes as I wander through the aisles). But that’s not the only thing covered under this commandment.” Several respondents noted that Luther helpfully, and sometimes painfully, expanded the commandments to include more than they had applied to them previously, thus making them hit home in new ways.

#### The First Commandment in Relation to the Others

Each respondent was asked in Step 5 of the Response Form for Volunteer Participants to comment on where and how they found their selected commandment reflected in and fulfilled by a proper observance of the First Commandment. Three of the respondents did not do this step. Twenty-three of the remaining twenty-five respondents found meaningful connection between their selected commandment and the First Commandment. The most common emphasis in their collective responses related to Luther’s claim that “to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely.” Several respondents noted appreciatively Luther’s explanation that having a God or a god (idol) were both “conditions of the heart.”

A repeated positive response to Luther’s comments on the First Commandment related to his call to “cling to God above all else.” The commandments were recognized as differing ways we can make anything into a god, and often do. One respondent noted that our idol may even “be our own truth, which we substitute for God’s truth, claiming (in vain) that it is God’s truth.” Another

respondent acknowledged that being reminded that we are not to have other gods, be they “money, things, people (parents) . . . sets the tone for what is to come in the rest of the commandments.” One participant summarizes her reflections on the First Commandment by acknowledging that idols “create barriers between people and work against the interrelatedness and fundamental equality of all people.” It was recognized that if we cling to a false god (an idol) we will be much more likely to commit the various kinds of violence named in the commandments (using God’s name wrongly, killing, stealing, adultery, false witness, coveting.) However, this same respondent noted that “when people realize that all has been created in the image of God and are loved by God, then they will be less likely to commit acts of violence against one another.”

There was also an appreciation of Luther’s humble acknowledgment of his own failure to do all that is commanded in the positive sense. One respondent commented about not feeling so bad about her failure related to coveting when she read of Luther’s own confession of the same. The respondent acknowledged, “It’s refreshing to discover that a great theologian battled with the same issues that I struggle with. It helps me to accept my sinful nature.” Several other respondents found help and comfort in Luther’s personal confessions of failing to observe the positive intentions of the commandments. Luther’s reminder was appreciated that it is God to whom we are to cling and not our righteousness—a righteousness Luther admits we will never perfect. To cling to our righteousness is as much clinging to an idol as anything else.

### Summary of Lickert Scale Responses

The Lickert scale included five questions with five options for response ranging from positive to negative. The small number of respondents (twenty-eight), and the variability of interpretation of the categories of evaluation do not lend themselves to precise measurement and therefore do not warrant a presentation of percentages for each individual question. The data clearly shows that the overwhelming majority of responses to each question were positive. An average of 1 response out of 28 total responses per question was marked negative. An average of 23.6 responses out of 28 total responses per question were marked positive. An average of 3.4 responses out of 28 total responses per question were marked undecided.

The first question on this graph was “How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther’s *Large Catechism*?” Of the twenty-eight respondents, twenty-six respondents evaluated their experience as meaningful. Two respondents found the experience not meaningful.

The second question was “Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?” Out of the twenty-eight respondents, twenty-two found this aspect of the exploration meaningful. Five respondents were undecided about whether it was meaningful. One found it not very meaningful.

The third question on the Lickert scale was “Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate

your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?” Of the twenty-eight respondents, twenty-three noted that they were stimulated toward deepened reflection by the exercise. Four respondents were undecided. One evaluated it as not very stimulating but added a note to the graph at this point explaining that while she did not find Luther’s comments on her selected commandment (the Fourth Commandment) stimulating, “the reading on the First Commandment was very powerful.”

The fourth question on the Lickert scale was “How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact finding but formation?” Of the twenty-eight respondents, again twenty-three respondents gave this question a positive response. Five respondents were undecided.

The fifth question was “Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?” Of the twenty-eight respondents, twenty-four recommend the development of an updated user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism*. Three respondents were undecided. One respondent was against recommending the development of an updated guide. In his journal entry, one of the respondents concluded, “I am not sure how much needs updating. I enjoyed it as it is. I would not want to lose Luther in the updating.” Another respondent, the one who recommended against the development of an undated resource, attached a note to his graph as well asking, “Is updating necessary? Or would it revise and detract from Luther’s understanding?” This comment does not discourage the use of the *Large*

*Catechism* as a resource for meditation on the Ten Commandments, but does discourage any “updating” that would alter Luther’s writing. These two comments both seem to encourage the direct use of the original source.

The two-page graph of the combined survey responses to the Lickert scale is included at the close of this chapter. Conclusions and suggestions drawn from this research as well as a brief outline for an adult curriculum proposal are presented in Chapter 5.

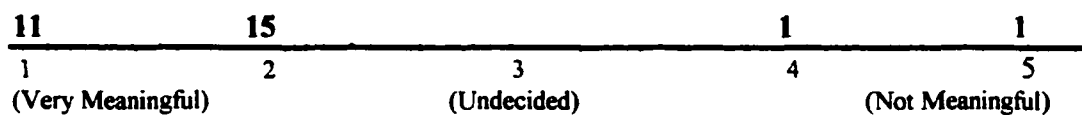
**THE TEN COMMANDMENTS  
COMBINED SURVEY RESPONSES**

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**Total responses: 28**

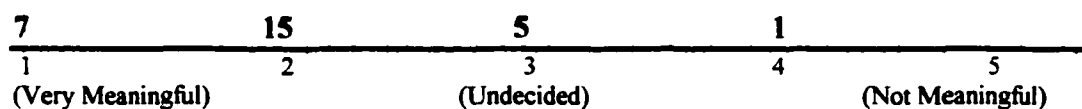
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents:



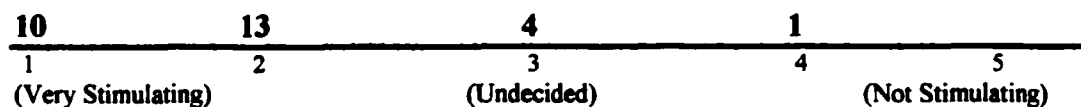
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

No. of respondents:





**TEN COMMANDMENTS  
COMBINED SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact finding but formation?

No. of respondents:

<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
(Serves well)		(Undecided)		(Serves Poorly)

- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:

<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
(Strongly Recommend)		(Undecided)		(Strongly do not Recommend)

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

In drawing conclusions from the research of this study I want to begin by acknowledging with gratitude the thoughtful responses submitted by the volunteer participants. As the demographic data shows, the participants spanned a variety of occupations and walks of life, thus adding richness to their collective voice. As I read their responses I was taken aback by how seriously many of them approached this exercise even while the majority are living very busy lives. Many responded favorably to the invitation to see this as an opportunity for formational reading rather than an exercise in gathering information. The encouragement to approach the exercise with the heart was particularly welcomed and many seemed thus to allow this exercise to become more for them than it might otherwise have been. As Laurence Freeman, Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation writes in *Jesus, the Teacher Within*, the word “heart” is meant to speak of an integration of heart and mind. It refers to wholeness, not to a separation between the heart and the intellect.<sup>1</sup> The respondents responded positively to the intentional encouragement of this integration.

#### A Surprisingly Contemporary Catechism

One of the first generalizations evident in the analysis of the data was the widely shared sense of surprise among the participants regarding how current and

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Freeman, *Jesus, the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 25.

relevant they found the catechism. One participant noted, “If I didn’t know better, I never would have guessed that Luther’s discussion on these commandments was written five hundred years ago. Another, whose first language is not English and who read the catechism in Spanish commented, “It is very impressive how actual (for today) Luther’s comments on the Ninth and Tenth Commandments are.” Several times writers noted that Luther’s comments on human nature—a desire to gloss over our wrongs and a wish always to have more than our neighbor—were consistent with their understanding of human nature today. Another responded, “I found much of this writing to be relevant and accessible to a contemporary Christian like myself, surprisingly so. It is certainly an un-mined spiritual resource, full of riches and wisdom.” A different respondent offered that “most religious training is informative rather than formative. People get bored. I can see that the commandments can be liberating once they are explained by Luther’s commentary and prayed as spiritual formation.” One respondent listed a number of “fun examples of holy Martin Luther’s wonderful humanity,” such as “his description of ‘back biters’ as ‘pigs in manure’” and his evaluation that this ‘serves such big mouths right . . . .’” Several noted as “current and helpful,” Luther’s encouragement “to ‘put the best construction on all we hear about our neighbors.’” One respondent commented on how Luther “expands our view to see the broad implications involved” in the commandments, noting that “[t]his [breadth of implication] is a crucial understanding for us in the world of today, in which our interactions with—and also influences on—others is immeasurable.” This respondent asks, “How might our existence be transformed if we embraced

God's will of genuine human connection?" She responds, "The prospects are amazing!" Another respondent noted the global relevancy of applying the commandments to the ways in which we depersonalize and vilify whole peoples by denying them their humanity. This respondent summarized his thoughts noting, "The best of the catechism calls me to be compassionate, forthright, and active in speaking well of my neighbor."

This evaluation that the *Large Catechism* is surprisingly contemporary was not offered without recognition that portions of Luther's reflections are outdated, offer little spiritual inspiration, and may even perpetuate unhelpful attitudes if the historical context is not taken into consideration. One cannot simply read the *Large Catechism* for spiritual inspiration without doing the hard work of contextual historical critique. Where there was a struggle with the *Large Catechism* it was not so much that the faith and life issues were not pertinent or meaningful for reflection but that the historical framework of Luther's day bring certain cultural limitations and make some of his explanations cumbersome and perhaps even misdirected as in his occasional "tirade against servants" as one respondent notes. Additional concerns were noted regarding Luther's perhaps over-emphasis toward protecting a neighbor's reputation when he suggests that "what is secret should be left secret." One respondent asked, "How does this speak to things like drugs, terrorism, sexual or physical abuse of children or women?"

Of all the commandments, Luther's comments on the Fourth Commandment seemed to cause the most difficulty and perhaps brought the most disappointment for

the respondents. Today's understandings regarding child/parent relationships are markedly different, for example, in life expectancy statistics alone. Children now often become their parents' parents, a reality Luther knew little of. There is also now a much greater understanding of the dangers and inappropriateness of child abuse within the family structure. Corporal punishment, assumed acceptable in the sixteenth century, is widely criticized today. Several of the respondents, all adults, had hoped Luther might offer insights helpful for reconciling past abuses from parents but found he instead seemed to downplay the tensions even though he himself apparently endured the common repeated practice of harsh corporal punishment. There was some concern that without editorial abridgement Luther's explanation of the Fourth Commandment could be more harmful than helpful. There was not, however, a unanimity regarding this concern. One respondent noted, "[o]ften I have thought that parents are the ones to whom is given a sacred duty to nurture children. To me, Luther brings a new idea that a 'holy work is here assigned children' —to honor their fathers and mothers. This respondent to the Fourth Commandment noted, "I found the text beneficial from a spiritually formative experience.

Acknowledging this diversity of response, the combined findings on the Lickert scale (shown at the close of Chapter 4) showed the overwhelming majority of the respondents strongly encouraged the development of a resource that would support more extensive use of the *Large Catechism* as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not information but formation. Two of the respondents added to this encouragement a strong caution that any new resource development should take

care to ensure Luther's writing was not updated or changed in any way that might cause the original Luther to be "lost" or minimized. They encouraged the development of a resource that would help facilitate the use of the *Large Catechism* today, but preferred a resource that would utilize Luther's writings unaltered rather than updated. The vast majority of respondents welcomed reading Luther's own writing and found they were stimulated by what he wrote to do their own reflecting.

It is interesting that only clergy had previously read the *Large Catechism* and of the clergy, only those who had received their training from Lutheran seminaries. Many of the laity expressed eagerness in response to the invitation to encounter it through this structured approach. In contrast to the largely pessimistic perspective of much of postmodern reflection on life, the journal and graph responses in this study demonstrated that participants were attracted to and intrigued by the effort to engage faith in dialogue with current issues as they find them represented in the Ten Commandments. In reviewing the journal entries as a whole, a common awareness runs throughout that our contemporary world offers little security, guarantee, or ability to control. While this could lead to cynicism, despair, or meaninglessness, the responses to this study witness on the contrary to a contemporary and heartfelt urge toward God. Far from finding the call to "trust in," "rely on," and "cling to God" archaic or off-putting, the respondents expressed confidence that there continues to be validity in such a call, even in our post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. My first conclusion, therefore, is that the responses gathered here witness to an eagerness for thoughtful engagement with resources that support reflection on how trusting in, relying on, and

clinging to God above everything else might best be nurtured and applied to daily life and that Luther's *Large Catechism* is promising as one such resource.

### The First Commandment—The Flagship Commandment

This project undertook to assess whether Luther's *Large Catechism* warranted being dusted off from its current shelf of underutilization as a resource for spiritual reading and offered as a meaningful contribution to the ecumenical field of spirituality today. As discussed in Chapter 1, I began with a lament that, while Augsburg's *Connections: Faith and Life* curriculum provides an updated, user-friendly presentation of portions of the *Large Catechism* as primary material, none of Luther's writings have been included in such spirituality series as The Crossroads Spiritual Legacy Series and the Western Spiritual Classics Series. Further, Luther's *Large Catechism* has not been on any radar screen that I have found related to the ecumenical field of spirituality, and few people other than Lutheran clergy seem to have read it. In many ways, however, as affirmed by the data gathered for this project, Luther offers what could be an insightful approach for the art of spiritual direction in his assertion that all of the commandments find their fulfillment in a proper observance of the First Commandment. His presentation of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism* is seminal and ought to be more widely shared. Several of the respondents quoted with emphasis Luther's statement regarding the intention of the First Commandment. He writes, "The intention of this [First] commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart,

which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone.”<sup>2</sup> Several respondents affirmed Luther’s conclusion that if we could “master this concept and incorporate it into our daily living” the remaining commandments would bring us no difficulty. Luther’s summary at the close of his explanation to the First Commandment offers a kind of litmus test as to whether or not we have “the one, true God.” Luther summarizes, “If you have the sort of *heart* that expects from [God] nothing but good, especially in distress and need, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God.”<sup>3</sup> Again, for Luther, it is a matter of the “heart.” One respondent commented on how different life is when we expect “nothing but good from God” rather than fearing that “we have been given the short end of the stick.” When we expect nothing but good, our fear that we must “look further than to” what and whom God has entrusted to us [and thereby break the commandments] becomes “unnecessary.” In light of these reflections, my second conclusion is that drawing the rest of the *Large Catechism*, with careful contextual and historical notes, through the insights Luther offers regarding the First Commandment would offer a rich resource for today’s reflective Christians not only for the field of religious education but also for the ecumenical field of spirituality.

The hunch that a corrective is needed if we are to recognize Luther as a contributor to the field of spirituality in addition to the field of religious education is not to suggest that the two fields are divided from each other. Historically, however, Luther has been recognized as an educator more than as a spiritual guide. Indeed, he

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<sup>2</sup> Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 386.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 390. My emphasis.



is both. In recent conversation about this project, one of the respondents commented that rather than spirituality being Luther's dominant mode, it "leaks through" his *Large Catechism*. If that evaluation of the *Large Catechism* is true, Luther's spirituality leaks through persuasively and passionately. He wrote as an intellectual, but he wrote of what he knew. He wrote from both existential and intellectual experience when he called people to "trust in," "rely on," and "to cling to God above everything else." Luther was a man of prayer—prayer as a serious, grace-centered practice of meditating on the Word over time, sometimes for hours at a time. He pointed to the mystic nature of faith as in his insistence that the anonymous *Theologia Germanica* be published and in his urge in his own writing, for example in "A Simple Way to Pray," to let go of his instructions on prayer when the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart. But even there, the Holy Spirit is a preacher of the Word. It is significant that in "A Simple Way to Pray," Luther urged his readers to "honor the Holy Spirit" by letting the Holy Spirit speak through the Word.<sup>4</sup> Luther knew the heart side of faith and he came at it through the Word. His spiritual guidance was always to direct people back to the Word. That his spirituality may appear "not direct" but rather as "leaking through" may be related to this concern for the Spirit's use of the Word as a medium of address. Luther's relationship with God is clearly a relationship of intimacy based on clinging to God above all else, but the way he explains that relationship is to tell the reader of his daily practice of meditating on the Word. He teaches, not about an experience of direct intimacy with God but about his

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<sup>4</sup> Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," vol. 43 of *Luther's Works*, 201.

experience of intimacy with God incarnate, revealed through the Word. Luther guides people toward this intimacy by teaching people how he prays using the catechism and meditating on the scriptures, especially the Psalms. He does not focus as much on what happens for him in the midst of his prayer as he does on how he prays and the comfort he derives from it. In his reading (praying) of the catechism and scripture, as Bass would say, “over time,”<sup>5</sup> Luther reads with the heart in that it is his intention at any moment to let go of his practice when the Holy Spirit, the real preacher, takes over and prays through the Word better than he can.<sup>6</sup> Luther’s emphasis in the *Large Catechism* and its preface was to teach the method of his prayer practice but also the theological insights that were the fruit of it and that he trusted would bear fruit for others who likewise clung to the Word. Luther teaches this Word-centered practice of prayer in a number of his devotional writings in addition to the *Large Catechism*, as noted in Chapter 2 and 3 of this paper. This passion for teaching his practice of prayer is grounded in the high regard in which he holds the Word of God. For Luther, the primacy of the Word as God’s medium of address is given highest place.

One of the respondents to this project noted, again in conversation after doing the assigned exercise, “Prayer could be what makes Luther not just purely intellectual.” He went on to offer that “prayer, as encouraged in Luther’s comments on the Second Commandment, seems to be his way of getting down into it with God.”

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy C. Bass et al., eds. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Luther, “A Simple Way to Pray.” vol. 43 of *Luther’s Works*, 201.

If this is so, Luther's way of "getting down into it" is never a practice devoid of the Word, both audible and visible (sacraments). (Our purposes here have limited our attention to the audible Word, but it is recognized in Luther scholarship that the visible Word of the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are held in equal esteem along with the audible Word. Both visibly and audibly the Word is the power of God. As Luther writes, "Indeed, [God] makes and does nothing except through his Word, Genesis 1, John 1, i.e. his *power*. And his *power* is not an ax, hatchet, saw, or file with which he works, but is himself."<sup>7</sup> "It is not mere bread that we eat in Christ's Supper, but the body of Christ."<sup>8</sup>) According to Luther, God chooses to address us from without, incarnate, in Word and Sacrament. In prayer we are waiting upon this promised address and are well advised to stop and listen whenever the Holy Spirit begins to speak.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps noteworthy here that several of the participants in this project offered the unsolicited feedback that they very much enjoyed reading Chapter 3 ("Spiritual Reading and Luther's Practice of Prayer") of this project and were pleased to learn more of Luther's approach to prayer.

### Luther's Heart-Centered Practice

While the intellectual Luther is the dominant mode through which the public knows Luther, the research of this project suggests that people welcome learning also of his earthy, heart-centered practice of approaching the Word by praying the catechism. The cultural, historical and religious realities of Luther's day shaped the

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament III*, vol. 37 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 61. My emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," vol. 43 of *Luther's Works*, 201.

focus and output of his teaching and writing. However, as the background chapters of this project suggest and the participants in its research experienced, Luther possessed an intense passion for teaching people to practice the means by which he was encountered by life-giving grace. Luther knew the encounter of this grace through his practice of reading the Word with the heart. Luther's conviction that this reading with the heart was nothing less than an encounter with the divine is clear in his insistence that people let the intellectual practice go whenever "the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart . . . Honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen."<sup>10</sup> Luther is well applauded for his penetrating intellectual grasp of the gospel. My third conclusion based on the research of this project is that people benefit also from learning of Luther's high regard for the Word in his practice of prayer and his heartfelt knowing that God's promises can be relied upon and that all the commandments are summed up in the First Commandment which insists that God alone deserves the place of God.

Luther's commitment to waiting upon God in prayer undergirded all that he wrote and did, even while his life work as a doctor of the church in the sixteenth-century plunged him into the demanding work of a reformer, debater, writer, preacher, and lecturer. His historical situation prevented too exclusive of a focus on prayer, but his efforts in teaching people to pray the catechism remained urgent. Even with all the demands on his time and the magnitude of his various responsibilities, Luther's pastoral heart remained captive at once by the Word and by

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<sup>10</sup> Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," vol. 43 of *Luther's Works*, 201.

the people in his charge who he feared were failing to attend to the Word that he knew from experience was the very source of life. It was his personal experience in combination with his pastoral heart that forced him to hammer passionately at the idols he feared were becoming alternative gods. For Luther, our God is that in which we put our trust. It is significant that in the midst of a publicly demanding career tangled in controversy and theological upheaval Luther still made it a priority not only to himself pray, but to teach others to pray and especially to pray the catechism.

In *Jesus, the Teacher Within*, Laurence Freeman urges readers to “get the question right before getting confused or intoxicated by the variety of answers.”<sup>11</sup> Luther’s catechisms are essentially questions with answers. The catechisms take the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, the articles of the Creed, each of the Ten Commandments, the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion and ask, “What is this?” Luther then offers answers responsive to his worldview and historical context. In interpreting the data from the research it appears, overwhelmingly, that the respondents did not let confusion or intoxication with Luther’s sixteenth-century answers limit their ability to take a fresh look at the commandments today. More significantly, in large part, Luther’s answers helped rather than hindered their thinking and reflecting. Freeman furthers his thought by saying that “to hear the question demands that we pause, pay attention and repeat the question” and see if the questions can become “redemptive questions,” questions that bring “newfound

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<sup>11</sup> Freeman, *Jesus, the Teacher Within*, 25.

wholeness,” restoration of life, meaning and compassion.<sup>12</sup> The data of this project confirm the existence of Christians today who welcome help in approaching the commandments as “redemptive questions” that guide grace-centered living in these post-September 11<sup>th</sup> days. The research gives substantive evidence that Luther’s *Large Catechism* offers a promising contribution to the ecumenical field of spirituality. The respondents gave voice, nearly unanimously, to a call to dust off Luther’s *Large Catechism* and lift it off its current shelf of underutilization, taking care to remember the limits set for it by its sixteenth-century context.

The research of this project indicates that a future step could be the development of a devotional resource that introduces Luther’s *Large Catechism* in such a way that the original source is used and Luther’s explanation of the First Commandment is central. This resource could guide discussion and lead meditation related to the insight that clinging to God above everything else helps, supports, and frees us for a “redemptive” observance of each of the commandments. Such a resource could be presented in combination with engaging participants in the art of spiritual reading by beginning each session with a guided practice of *lectio divina* using the lectionary readings for the day or the previous or upcoming Sunday. Additionally, it could also be useful within the context of introducing Luther’s *Large Catechism* to begin by briefly reviewing Luther’s *Small Catechism* especially for those for whom it is a new resource as well. Another possible place to begin could be

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

to introduce participants to Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray*, which is also based on the practice of praying the five components of the catechism.

An annotated outline for an adult series entitled "Luther's *Large Catechism*: Reading the Word with the Heart Today" is included at the close of this chapter. This outline is limited to a focus on the Ten Commandments and as such could be Series A of a larger adult series. Future efforts could include the development of a resource for engaging Luther's explanations in his *Large Catechism* to the Lord's Prayer (Series B), the Apostle's Creed (Series C), Holy Baptism (Series D), and Holy Communion (Series E).

Outline for an Adult Series on Luther's *Large Catechism*

**“Luther's *Large Catechism*: Reading the Word with the Heart Today”**

**Series A: The Ten Commandments**

**I. The Word as God's Address**

**A. A Brief History of Luther's Encounter with the Word**

1. Luther's fear of God's wrath and efforts to assuage it. (See “Life as a Monk” in *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation* by Martin Brecht, pp. 63-82).
2. Luther's encounter with grace through Romans and the Psalms (See Brecht, pp. 82-98 and/or *Here I Stand* by Roland Bainton, pp. 60-65).

**B. The *Large Catechism* in Contextual Review**

**A. Introduce Martin Luther's preface to the *Large Catechism***

(See the *Book of Concord*, 2002 edition, pp. 379-383).

**B. Briefly review the *Small Catechism* for comparison.**

(Have paperback copies available for purchase: \$4.00)

**C. Address Problems Presented by Sixteenth-Century Context**

1. Old language habits.
2. Fourth Commandment's parent/child issues.
3. Discuss apparent contradictions in Luther.
  - a. Gracious/punishing God, good/wrathful God.
  - b. Luther was at heart a pastor, and erred sometimes with messiness, toward a pastoral/exegetical theology over a



systematic theology.

## II. Reading with the Heart

### A. Overview of the Practice of Spiritual Reading

1. Use John Mogabgab's article "Along the Desert Road: Notes on Spiritual Reading" in *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective*, edited by E. Glenn Hinson.
2. Guide participants in an experience with *lectio divina*.

### B. Approaching the Word with the Heart

1. Introduce Luther's "A Simple Way to Pray," (see *Luther's Works*, vol. 43.).
2. Discuss Marjorie Thompson's foreword to *A Simple Way to Pray Martin Luther* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000). Have copies available for purchase (about \$10.00).
3. Discuss Luther's Proposed Prayer Pattern (See "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings" in *Luther's Works*, vol. 34 and "Practicing Christians: Prayer as Formation" by Martha Stortz in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* edited by Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme).

## III. Primacy of the First Commandment: An Approach to the Ten Commandments

### A. The First Commandment

1. Begin by practicing *lectio divina* with a text for the next Sunday.

2. Have copies of Luther's explanation to the First Commandment for each participant (pp. 386-390 in the *Book of Concord*, 2000).
3. Walk through the full text of Luther's explanation to the First Commandment (may choose to omit his explanation to the Appendix). (This walk-through may require two sessions.)
4. Read Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur." "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings . . . ." <sup>13</sup> In this poem, life for the bent world is attributed to the Spirit's brooding. Redemption is not due to the world's ability to unbend itself, but due rather to the warm breast and bright wings of God the persistent brooder. It is the brooding of the Holy Spirit that alters the bent world. The "world is charged," "nature is never spent," "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things," "because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods." Point to how Hopkins's thought in this nature poem is similar to Luther's understanding of God's goodness in his explanation to the First Commandment: "Look on [God] as the one who will . . . lavish all good things upon you richly," and "[God] is an eternal fountain who overflows with all goodness." (See Luther, *Large Catechism* in the *Book of Concord*, 388-89.)

#### B. Commandments One and Two

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<sup>13</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Middlesex, England: Penguin Press, 1974), 24.

1. Begin by practicing *lectio divina* with a text for the next Sunday.
2. Review Luther's explanation of the Second Commandment in the *Large Catechism*.
3. Review selected journal entries on the Second Commandment from this project (Appendix D).
4. Invite participants to journal: "Where does this commandment connect with my life/world?" "What might God be saying today?"
5. Invite any who wish to share responses.
6. Discuss how a fulfillment of the First Commandment includes a fulfillment of the Second Commandment.

- C. Commandments One and Three (repeat as above using Third and First)
- D. Commandments One and Four (repeat as above using Fourth and First)
- E. Commandments One and Six (repeat as above using Sixth and First)
- F. Commandments One, Five, Seven, and Eight (repeat as above using Fifth, Seventh, Eighth, and First)
- G. Commandments One, Nine, and Ten (repeat as above using Ninth, Tenth, and First)

#### IV. Evaluation and Closing Celebration

- A. What was most helpful?
- B. What would you do differently?
- C. Introduce topic for Series B: The Lord's Prayer

D. Closing Worship and Fellowship using reflections on prayer in Luther's (1531) *Table Talk*. (See *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54. "What It Takes to Understand the Scriptures" pg. 9, "Treatment of Melancholy, Despair, Etc" pp. 15-8, "Dog Provides Example of Concentration" pg. 37, "Prayer and the Promise of God" pp. 52-53, "Everybody Must Believe for Himself" pp. 453-54).

V. Possible Group Formats

A. Suggestion for a large number of participants (Retreat plus 8 sessions)

1. Lead teacher could offer I and II above as a weekend retreat.
2. For III, participants could meet as Small Groups for 8 sessions.
  - a. Small group facilitators would be needed.
  - b. Lead teacher would meet with facilitators.
3. Evaluation and closing worship at 8<sup>th</sup> session with whole group.

B. Suggestion for a small number of participants (12 sessions)

1. I and II above could be taught by a lead teacher over 3 sessions.
2. III could be led by shared facilitation for 8 sessions.
3. Evaluation/closing worship using *Table Talk* at 12th session.

## Appendix A

### **The Ten Commandments\* as listed in Martin Luther's Preface to the *Large Catechism***

First

You are to have no other gods besides me.

Second

You are not to take the name of God in vain.

Third

You are to hallow the day of rest.

Fourth

You are to honor father and mother.

Fifth

You are not to kill.

Sixth

You are not to commit adultery.

Seventh

You are not to steal.

Eighth

You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.

Ninth

You are not to covet your neighbor's house.

Tenth

You are not to covet his wife, male or female servants, cattle, or whatever is his.\*\*

\*The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20:2-17. The wording here is Luther's in his *Large Catechism* found in the *Book of Concord*. In numbering the commandments, Luther follows the traditional numbering of the Vulgate, not the numbering of the Hebrew Bible.

\*\*In the New Revised Standard Version it reads: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (*Thoughts on gender inclusive language related to Luther's Large Catechism is included in Chapter 5 of this paper*).

Appendix B

**PRAYING THROUGH LUTHER'S LARGE CATECHISM**

RESPONSE FORM FOR VOLUNTEER PARTICIPANTS

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**STEP 1**

Please read through the commandments as numbered by Martin Luther in the Preface to his *Large Catechism* (see Appendix A). As you are doing so, ponder these questions: "Which commandment seems most to catch your attention in relationship to your life and/or what is going on in the world? Upon which commandment would you like most to focus your own reflection?"

Note your selected commandment: \_\_\_\_\_

**STEP 2**

Some of you I know are familiar with the practice of spiritual reading, but since some of you may not be I've enclosed the chapter "Spiritual Reading and Luther's Practice of Prayer" as a place to begin. It also explains a little of why we are doing this so reading it may help all of us be on the same page.

**STEP 3**

For STEP 3, do a preliminary reading of Luther's discussion of your selected commandment in the *Large Catechism*. STEP 4 will be a closer reading, but it is important first to see what you are dealing with. As you begin, it may be helpful to remember the following: As you know, Luther wrote this document nearly five hundred years ago (1529) in Germany, responding to the questions and realities of his day with the particular blinders of his cultural milieu. Consequently, it is expected that there will be notions and understandings that are archaic and no longer useful, even perhaps offensive. What may not be expected is that there could also be helpful insights in Luther's sixteenth century contribution worth dusting off from a twenty-first century perspective. In this first reading be aware of whatever is off-putting and out of sync with today so you can set that aside. The point of this first reading is to clear the way past what is archaic or offensive so you are ready for a second reading of attending to whatever good might remain.

**STEP 4**

Having read Luther's comments on your commandment, please go through his text a second time with the attitude of spiritual reading where the primary interest is moving from information to formation. With that in mind, make note of what you think might be helpful for today. Journal about phrases or concepts that hold meaning for you. Are there insights, words of caution, encouragement, or guidance that catch your attention and invite further reflection? (Either handwritten or typed is fine.)

Commandment # \_\_\_\_\_ "You are \_\_\_\_\_."

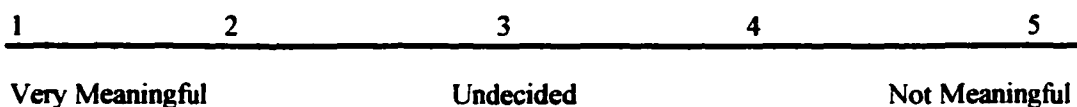
**STEP 5**

Luther understood the First Commandment as a summary and fulfillment of all the other commandments. He taught that one "who fulfills the First Commandment has no difficulty in fulfilling all the rest." Please now read Luther's comments in his *Large Catechism* on the First Commandment paying attention for how your selected commandment relates to the First Commandment. Where and how do you find your commandment reflected in and fulfilled by a proper observance of the First Commandment? Comment briefly below.

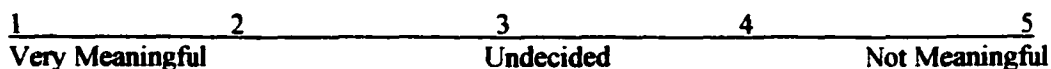
**STEP 6**

Finally, mark your responses to the following questions on the graphs below:

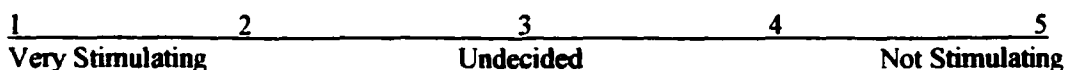
(1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?



(2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?



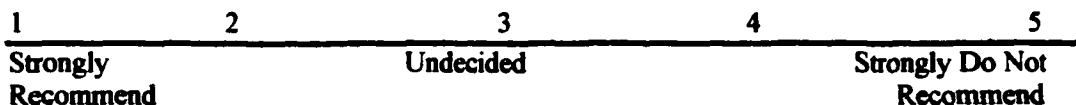
(3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?



(4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact finding but formation?



(5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide for using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?





# DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

For how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

Had you read Luther's *Large Catechism* previously? \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

Educational background \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Age Range: 35 and under \_\_\_\_, 36-55 \_\_\_\_, 56 or over \_\_\_\_

Single \_\_\_\_\_ Coupled \_\_\_\_\_

Other categories you would like to identify \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*(Findings are reported blind so names will not be listed along with analysis of data. However, participants are named and acknowledged alphabetically as a group, in appreciation of their participation, unless otherwise requested by a participant).*

## Appendix C

(Page 1 of 2)

### TALLIED DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

<b>Total Respondents:</b>	<b>28</b>	
<b>Religions represented:</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Christian Congregationalist</b>
	<b>2</b>	<b>- United Church of Christ</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Episcopal Church, U.S.</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Metropolitan Community Church</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Roman Catholic (nonpracticing)</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Christian – no denominational affiliation</b>
<b>Ethnicity:</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>- White</b>
	<b>3</b>	<b>- Latino</b>
	<b>2</b>	<b>- African American</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Puerto Rican</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Asian American</b>
<b>Gender:</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>- Female</b>
	<b>12</b>	<b>- Male</b>
<b>Educational Level:</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>- High School</b>
	<b>6</b>	<b>- Bachelor's Degree</b>
	<b>16</b>	<b>- Master's Degree</b>
	<b>2</b>	<b>- Ph. D. / Ed. D.</b>
<b>Age:</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>- 35 years or less</b>
	<b>13</b>	<b>- 36–55</b>
	<b>8</b>	<b>- 56 years or more</b>
<b>Previously Read Luther's Large Catechism:</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>- Yes</b>
	<b>24</b>	<b>- No</b>
<b>Self-identifying categories</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>- Gay/Lesbian</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>- Green party</b>
<b>Occupations:</b>	<b>Seminary Student, Administrative Assistant, Physical Therapist, Student (6), Clergy (5), Teaching Assistant (2), Accountant, Consultant/Executive, Writer/Editor (2), Teacher,</b>	

**Secretary (2), Homemaker, Nurse, "God knows,"  
Nutritionist Consultant, Musical Comedy Star,  
Parish Coordinator, Realtor, Public School  
Administrator, Researchers (3)**

**Geographical Locations:**

- Southern California (22)**
- Northern California (1)**
- Florida (1)**
- Maryland (1)**
- New Mexico (1)**
- Washington State (2)**

## Appendix D

### JOURNAL REFLECTIONS OF RESPONDENTS

(Journal entries include commentary on Commandments Two through Ten as well as on how each respondent saw their selected commandment reflected in a proper observance of the First Commandment.)

#### COMMANDMENT #2

*"You shall not take the name of God in vain."*

Three of the participants chose to respond to Commandment #2.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandment #2:

In the wake of world events, the first participant begins by asking, "To what extent is all the "God bless America outpouring in the wake of 9/11/01 a violation of this commandment?" And, "Is some of this outpouring a misuse of the holy name—for example to the extent that it puts "God bless America" in opposition to "God save the world"? He moves on to answer his own question: "If we use 'God bless America' with such a distinction in mind, as sometimes seems to be the case (not always, to be sure, and maybe only rarely), it would constitute a violation of this commandment."

Further questions deepen his reflections on this commandment, "Do we use this and other invocations of God's name to gloss over our own shortcomings—as individuals, as a country? Do we take refuge in God's name when we shouldn't? Are we teaching our children the right way to call upon God's name by overusing it as we have since 9/11?" Following these questions he points out, "This commandment can be read as a promise, as well as a threat. God's name, says

Luther, has been ‘given to us precisely for our use and benefit.’ For example, such as when we use it in prayer. God’s name should be hallowed in this regard, as in the Lord’s Prayer, but it also should be used, not avoided, ‘in the service of truth and of all that is good.’

In conclusion he admits that he is “not sure that God’s “wrath and punishment” results from “willful contempt of this commandment,” as Luther writes. Instead, this contemporary historian offers an alternative possibility saying, “Perhaps the explanation is simpler. Failure to ‘just say yes’ to God’s alien righteousness may mean that the kingdom of God can’t come just yet. It is held back. Thus it can’t obviate the bad stuff that happens on its own (without God directly causing it) or perhaps because of Satan. We honor God’s name and bring the kingdom closer by calling upon that name in faith and in prayer—that is the promise of this commandment. We should do this every day.”

How this respondent saw Commandment #1 reflected in Commandment #2:

The participant points out that “Luther says that the intent of this commandment is for us to trust in God alone—the true God, on which our heart should rely and depend to the exclusion of all idols. It is this God alone from whom we receive everything good and by whom we are delivered from all evil. We have to call upon the name of that one true God, in faith, to deliver us from evil and both to ask and give thanks for the good things we want. When we do that—i.e., when we pray to God and, thus, use the name of God properly, as God wants us to use it—we also properly observe the Second Commandment.”

2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #2:

This journal entry begins by commenting on Luther's "beautiful line": "For the first things that burst forth and emerge from the heart are words." (392) But, she asks, "Is it really true? Are words the first to 'burst forth and emerge'?"

The respondent then reflects on Luther's statement "It is a misuse of God's name if we call upon the Lord God in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind." More specifically, she notes, "It seems this is often done, especially by people claiming to be Christian. What come to mind are the conservative Christian leaders who blamed the events of September 11 on gays, feminists, etc. and said that God was withdrawing "his" (*sic*) favor from the U.S. because of those sins. I bet they would never have thought that in doing so they might have been taking the name of the Lord in vain. Instead I imagine they say themselves as speaking the "truth"—God's truth—and that they were being prophetic or leading people to the truth." This leads her to ask, "How and when, then, do we dare speak in God's name?"

Reflecting on Luther's admonition that "God's name cannot be abused more flagrantly than when it is used to lie and deceive" (393), this respondent asks, "Wasn't this done frequently after September 11?" And further, "Is all the 'God bless America' language a way of using God's name in vain, i.e., to justify whatever the U.S. does—e.g. military action and internal security measures that deprive people of their rights?"

This respondent points out Luther's comment that "the greatest abuse . . . is in spiritual matters, which affect the conscience, when false preachers arise and present their lying nonsense as God's word" (393). In response this participant ponders, "How often I see this happening—yet how often do I feel comments are 'lying nonsense' simply because I don't agree with what they say?" She asks further, "Do I take God's name in vain when I try to communicate what God says, desires, honors, etc.? How do I know when I do take God's name in vain and when I don't?"

Luther comments that "all of this is an attempt to deck yourself out with God's name or to put up a good front and justify yourself with his name . . ." (393). In reflecting on his phrase "deck yourself out" this participant asks, "Why do we deck ourselves out with God's name? Is it to justify what we do as right or holy? Why do we—why do I always have to feel right?" Furthering his thought, Luther adds, "Lying and deceiving are themselves great sins, but they become much more serious when we try to justify and confirm them by invoking God's name and thus make it into a cloak to hide our shame." The participant responds by asking, "What shame are we trying to hide—am I trying to hide—by invoking God's name?" Continuing on Luther claims, "As little as God will permit the heart that turns away from him to go unpunished, just as little will he permit his name to be used to disguise a lie" (393). The respondent notes that it is "interesting" that "the first part of this sentence makes me uneasy (I guess I don't like the sense of the punishing God), and yet the last part of the sentence gives me hope—that those who use the name of God in vain will be revealed for what they are: liars."

Luther notes that “there are few who trust in God with their whole heart” (393), to which the respondent asks, “What allows some people to trust in God with their whole heart?” To Luther’s command that “whenever (young people) violate (the commandments), we must be after them at once with the rod, confront them with the commandment, and continually impress it upon them...” (394), this respondent offers the following comments: “It seems to me, though, that especially with taking the name of God in vain we often don’t realize it is being done. It is only later when we have more information that we realize that we have been deceived in God’s name.”

The respondent wonders what Luther means by “practice magic” (394). She also comments on this statement, “since we are forbidden here to use his holy name in support of falsehood and wickedness, it follows conversely, that we are commanded to use it in the service of truth and of all that is good. . . .” She notes, “This is logical, but it was very striking to have it pointed out—my response was kind of a ‘yes, of course.’ And yet the ‘of course’ doesn’t seem to happen very often. Why is it that we use God so often in a negative way rather than as an invitation to the good?” She also wonders if we need to “swear” “in support of the good and for the advantage of our neighbor” by which, according to Luther, “God is praised, truth and justice are confirmed, falsehood is refuted, people are reconciled, obedience is rendered, and quarrels are settled” (395). She asks, “Do we need to explicitly swear if we live our lives with truth and justice, etc.? Don’t our lives become a living ‘oath’ when we live in accordance with God’s will?”



In her closing comments on Commandment #2 this participant notes Luther's comment from the sixteen century: "It is evident that the world is more wicked than it has ever been" (395). She asks, "Isn't this true today too? So if this is true (and was true), might it not also be true that the world is better than it has ever been?" Finally, she points out Luther's comment that "what a person enforces by means of beatings and blows will come to no good end" (396). Of this she agrees, saying, "Yes, I think this is true." "But," she goes on to ask, "why then does Luther so often advocate the rod?"

#### How this participant saw Commandment #2 reflected in Commandment #1

"One connection seems clear: when we take God's name in vain it is probably to, in one way or another, promote a false god." She goes on to note that "when Luther writes of money as a god, I can't help but think of many contemporary preachers of 'abundance' who present themselves as spiritual yet their goal (or god) seems to be acquisition of money." She comments further that "[i]f 'to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely,' we may use God's name (take it in vain) to justify our idol. Our idol may be our own truth, which we substitute for God's truth, claiming (in vain) that it is God's truth."

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #2:

A third participant begins by noting that "it is significant when Luther says, 'It is a misuse of God's name if we call upon the Lord God . . . whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind.' It is important that he explains that taking the name of God in vain does not simply mean to use it in everyday life (e.g. "Oh, my God")

instead of “Oh, my Gosh.”) Another part that struck her was that Luther mentioned that “ministers and priests can use the name of god in vain when they lie or make false pretenses in the name of God.”

Additionally, she found it significant that Luther says this is “the greatest sin that can be committed outwardly.” She reflected on this, noting, “We often do not take this as seriously as it is meant to be, and this should be stressed when we are teaching the commandments and Luther’s beliefs.”

In closing, this respondent agreed that it is important to look at what is offensive or outdated in what Luther wrote (“remove or explain what he means”). “For example, when he talks about people breaking/denying a marriage oath . . . . [t]his needs to be clearer to a common reader like me.”

#### How this participant saw Commandment #2 reflected in Commandment #1

This respondent acknowledges at the start that this question was “semi-difficult,” but that she’d do her best. She wrote, “When Luther explains what the First Commandment means, he says that God is saying, ‘I will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else.’ She reflects on this, saying, “When you fulfill this commandment and have true faith in God, you would not want to disrespect your true God by taking His name in vain or swearing falsely by it. So, if you believe in God and are true in your faith, the other commandments should come naturally as to serve the one whom you depend on. Your heart will naturally want to praise and serve, not to hurt and disrespect.”

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment #2

This respondent offers words of insight, caution, and guidance:

“This commandment deals with the outer responses, i.e., words, to the inner condition of the heart (P2). Luther makes it practical and down-to-earth rather than mysterious, e.g., oaths in court, business affairs, marriage, to lie, and to deceive--I can understand. His understanding of human nature ‘whenever we commit a wrong we like to cover it and gloss over our disgrace...’ P8 is consistent with my understanding of today.

“Words of Caution: P3 cautions not to say things that support falsehood or to lie or deceive. I think deceive is a key word for today. P8 cautions about wanting to look good.

“Guidance: P11 instructs how to use God's work properly, i.e., support the truth, praise, and to call on God. Pss. 13-18 deal with the training of children.”

#### How the respondent saw Commandment #2 reflected in Commandment #1

“Commandment #1 relates to having a God or god--a condition of the heart. Luther says that Commandment #2 deals with the outward response, i.e., ‘... the first things that burst forth and emerge from the heart are words (P2).’ I do have some questions about this relationship as I observe it in people’s language today. I would like to learn more about this.

**“It is probably true that the First commandment covers all. Having said that, the second (and all following) are more specific and focused and do contribute to a clearer understanding.”**

**The respondent, a lifelong Lutheran, concluded with the following concern:**

**“I am not sure how much [of Luther’s *Large Catechism*] needs updating. I enjoyed it as it is. I do have some questions, but is that not part of the understanding process? I would not want to lose Luther in the updating.”**

**SECOND COMMANDMENT**  
*"You are not to take the name of God in vain."*

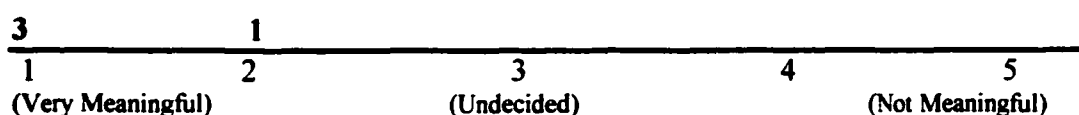
**SURVEY RESPONSES**

**Total Responses for this Commandment: 4**

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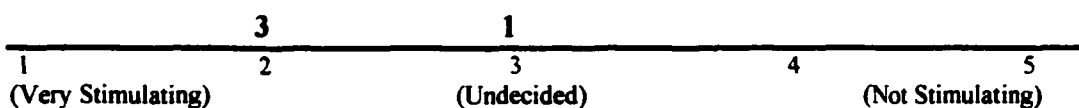
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents (in boldface):



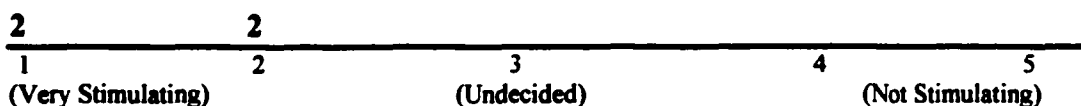
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

No. of respondents:

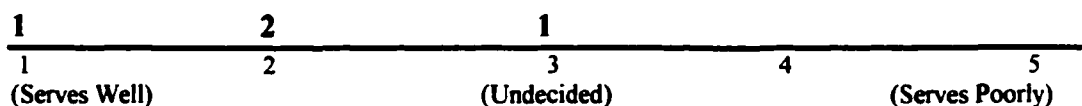


**SECOND COMMANDMENT  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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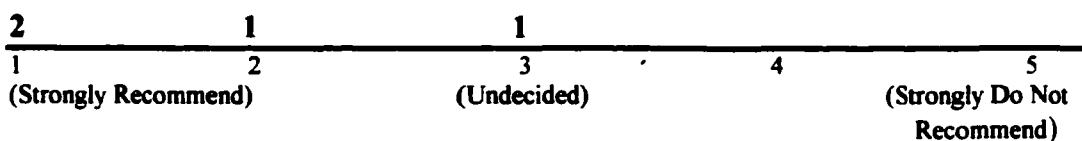
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:



COMMANDMENT #3  
*"You are to hallow the day of rest."*

Two of the participants chose to respond to the Third Commandment.

1st Respondent to Commandment #3:

To this participant, phrases found meaningful in the Third Commandment were: "Worship ought to take place daily." "The day itself does not need to be made holy, for it was created holy. But God wants it to be holy for you. So it becomes holy or unholy on your account. . . ." Additionally, he pointed out Luther's rhetorical question, "How does such sanctifying take place? ... When we make use of God's Word and *exercise* ourselves in it." (respondent's emphasis) And, two last phrases stood out to this respondent, "This commandment consists not in the resting but in the hallowing." And, "It is violated by that other crowd who listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear the sermon. . . ."

In response to these phrases this participant comments, "I like Luther's point that the day was created holy, removing that responsibility from our hands, but at the same time that it becomes holy for us depending on what we do. It is a nice balance between recognizing the awesomeness or omniscience of God but also giving value to human action." He goes on say, "I like the idea that worship can happen daily, and therefore on our own, and does not have to be centered around one day at church. That word 'exercise' (it would be interesting to check the translation) is nice because it strongly contradicts the common understanding of a day of rest. Like physical exercise, this spiritual exercise could be a discipline or routine that people do

everyday. Perhaps they are given direction in this exercise, but ultimately it is something they do on their own. It is a much more active understanding of worship and may help move people away from the tendency that Luther points out to treat a church service like ‘entertainment’ and to go through it out of ‘force of habit’.”

(Given these comments on exercise and entertainment it is noteworthy that this respondent is a twenty-year-old college student.)

#### How this participant saw Commandment #1 reflected in Commandment #3

The first respondent to Commandment #3 reflected on its relationship to the First Commandment saying, “If one follows the First Commandment and lives with God at the center of his life, then he will have no problem ‘hallowing’ the day of rest or living in a way devoted to God and God’s word.”

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #3:

This person offers six reflections.

“(1) Our bodies need rest.

(2) Those who do manual labor especially need rest. Therefore, even if we don’t do that type of labor ourselves, we should think about refraining from activities that require others to do tedious or difficult labor, e.g., grocery shopping, other shopping, going to restaurants. . . . A Jewish friend told me of his wife’s indignation when some Jewish friends of theirs mentioned shopping on Sundays. Even though Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath, my friend’s wife thought it just as bad to prevent others from observing *their* own Sabbath as to violate one’s own holy day.



- (3) More than a day of rest, the Sabbath is a day set apart for worship, although, ideally, ‘worship ought to take place daily’ (398).
- (4) Keep it holy—devote oneself to holy words, works, living. The day itself is already holy through creation. ‘God wants it to be holy for [me]’ (398). How? “[W]hen [I] make use of God’s Word and exercise [myself] in it’ (398). Why? So that I ‘regulate [my] entire life and being in accordance with God’s Word’ (398). Luther emphasizes hallowing over resting.
- (5) The commandment is violated especially by those who listen to God’s Word ‘as entertainment’ or ‘from force of habit’ (399).
- (6) Luther talks about the sin of *acidia* or ‘the devil of the noon-day sun’ as early monastics described it. In order to combat the ‘devil’ of ‘laziness or weariness’ (400), listlessness, Luther instructs us to “constantly keep God’s Word in [our] heart, on [our] lips, and in [our] ears. . . . Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the word, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word ‘the devil is cast out and put to flight’ (400).”

#### How the participant saw Commandment #1 reflected in Commandment #3

The second respondent to Commandment #3 wrote, “We are to look to God alone to give us good things (389). This enables us, then, to rest, to take time away from the things we think we need to do in order to survive and prosper. ‘To cling to [God] with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely’

(388).” In addition she comments, “By taking a day apart for worship and instruction, we guard against false worship and idolatry” (388).

THIRD COMMANDMENT  
*"You are to hallow the day of rest."*

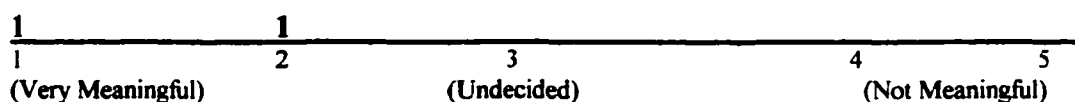
SURVEY RESPONSES

Total responses for this commandment: **2**

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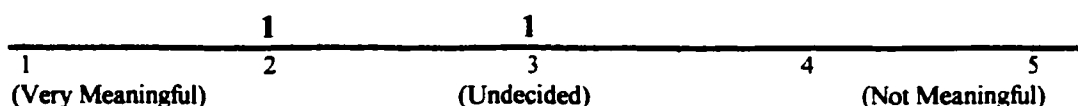
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents (in boldface):



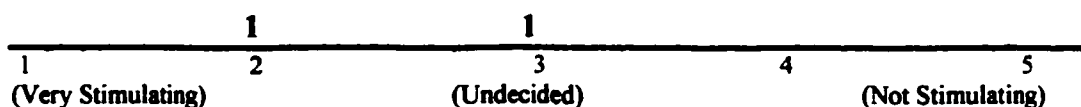
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

No. of respondents:

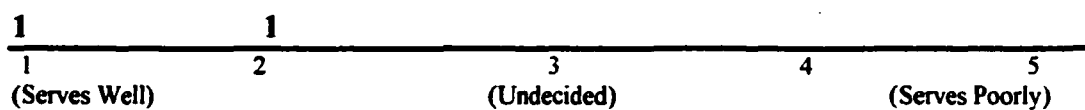


**THIRD COMMANDMENT  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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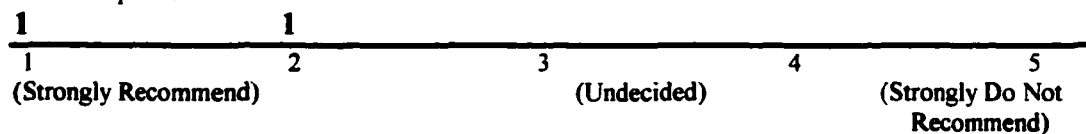
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:



**COMMANDMENT # 4**  
*"You are to honor your father and mother."*

Six of the participants chose to respond to the Fourth Commandment.

**1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandment #4:**

The first respondent begins his comments explaining his attraction to this commandment because of the deep love he holds for his parents. (Then he noticed it was the one with the most pages.) In responding to what he found "archaic and off-putting" in Luther's writing, he comments, "The threatening tone and infliction of fear and guilt in certain areas of his discourse," he thinks is in response to Luther's "catholic education," though he guessed he was the "first Protestant."

This participant went on to note that "At the same time there is a contemporariness in the writing stemming from his emphasis on our own actions and the conflict between the young and unruly and the older generation, the parents, who, as he points out, are also wild and disparaging." This respondent found Luther's main point to be "to keep that honoring posture towards our parents." He notes that this is "a very hard thing to do I guess for those who have been molested and abused by their parents." In his own case he has "valued them preciousy" and honors and respects them. He notes that this is all "with the help of God" because he has been "critical of some of their actions." He does not "forget that someday I may be a father and that I would like it to be done to me as I have done to them."

The respondent points out that "sometimes for parents who have gone 'too far,' jail has been required." He believes that "it is issues like this that would merit the study of Luther's writings on this topic . . . use it makes us think about our own

faith and about today's society's way of thinking." "I believe and like the fact that our parents are God's representatives, but I could not find in the catechism a space dedicated to the communication between parents and children. The issue of obedience is very important, but [Luther] really comes down hard on the rebel, i.e., 'God will send you death and the executioner, misfortune, the grim reaper.' The respondent goes on to say, "This brings me to the thought of how we are saved. We are taught, and Luther mentions this a few times, that we are saved by grace and not our actions, but our actions bring us wrath, God's unfavor. . . . As I reflect more on this, I believe that God has tests for us, and that we want to be seen doing the right things." Luther reminds us that by obeying "we may be well and live long on the earth." If not, we "will die earlier and will not be happy in life." Is not this what happens when there is discord in a family? —when there is no communication and a lack of discipline? —when there is no love for the parents and the children are not guided?"

In conclusion he adds, "It looks to me that psychology can play a role in 'proving' what Luther said 500 years ago. And in many instances what God is trying to tell us. Luther mentions at the beginning that things will go well "provided that 'parents', too, are subordinated to God" and he later reiterates "how they should treat those whom they have been appointed to rule." It was important to this participant that Luther found it "necessary to devote serious attention to the young." The respondent summarized his comments saying that "these thoughts expose Luther's wisdom. His boldness to apply the word of God to our everyday life, a practicality of

thought that was going to be needed if the current trend of the Christian church was to be redirected.”

**How the respondent saw Commandment #4 reflected in Commandment #1**

The first respondent to Commandment #4 reflects that being “reminded that we are not to have other gods” (including money, things, people [parents]) sets “the tone for what is to come in the rest of the commandments.” More precisely he states, “To know that we can entrust ourselves to God completely, directs our faith the right way and lets us keep the right kind of faith that we should keep for our fallible terrestrial parents.” He also likes how Luther breaks down the commandments, the first three being directed toward God, and how he calls our parents the first neighbor on that list of “others” to whom we should be respectful. In conclusion he writes, “I guess this is a reminder of what is and probably always will be the most important and toughest job in the world: to be a parent.”

**2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #4:**

Another respondent who chose Commandment #4 writes, “Coming from a Social Science background, I have looked at the Ten Commandments more as a plan for social cohesion, making this Fourth Commandment important primarily for the sake of passing cultural instruction from one generation to another. Luther does not specifically make this association, but it is clearly reflected in his discussions of the blessings that parents give to their children for which children should be grateful. It also is reflected in his description of what happens to children who do not honor father and mother. In modern language, these children become sociopathic.”

This respondent relates Luther to our twenty-first century noting, “Luther seems to press this commandment to the extreme when he idealizes the child who honors father/mother so much that he/she stays in the family home, serving his/her parents, in opposition to using what the parents have given to contribute to improvement (technological advancement) of society. Since Luther writes at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, his anti-technological position is understandable. But it is a position open to debate, even in Christian circles, in the twenty-first century.”

From here, the participant focuses on what he found of benefit to him in Luther’s writing. “He opens anew for me territory that has long been digested and forgotten,” namely, the emphasis Luther “puts on the child’s relationship to the parents, who are conduits of God’s blessings.” Their response, Luther believes, “should be constant regard and concern for their wishes and desires, even then those wishes and desires seem extreme. “Perhaps because in Luther’s time parents did not grow old enough to need another person to distinguish between ‘wishes and desires’ and ‘true welfare,’ or because Luther’s relationship with his parents had diminished when he was writing the *Large Catechism* (he seems not to have followed his own strong advice), Luther does not touch on the subject of children becoming leaders for their parents in old age. In assuming that the parents are always the leaders and the children are always the followers, his explanation of the Fourth Commandment loses some impact in today’s world. More thought must be given to how a child honors an



incompetent parent or when and how the duties of the child change in order to continue honoring the parent.”

The participant, formerly a lawyer, sees an important insight into this commandment in the relationship Luther draws between parenthood and civil government. The respondent notes that “the issue of servant/master relationship is not significant now in our culture.” He writes that Luther suggests we have an “obligation to honor government because it is a conduit of God’s blessing just as parents are a conduit of God’s blessing.”

In conclusion he writes, “There is much for us to learn today from Luther’s explanation of this Fourth Commandment, but we may need to approach it with care, because Luther does not discuss some matters that are important in our culture that may not have been in his. These ‘holes’ color our understanding of his point of view and may lead us to misunderstand his intent.”

#### How the respondent saw Commandment #4 reflected in Commandment #1

The second respondent writes, “The Fourth Commandment amplifies and explains the 1<sup>st</sup>, so that they are not separate requirements. But, one must be careful to recognize that it is God who blesses through the father and mother and not the father and mother alone who do the blessing. Otherwise that one will fall into the trap of honoring father and mother as false gods. Luther specifically cautions against this in his explanation of the First Commandment. We, then, must give thanks to God for father and mother and in this way honor them.”

**3<sup>rd</sup> Respondent to Commandment # 4:**

At the end of her comments, this participant writes, “thank you for this opportunity to take part in the project. I always knew we must adhere to this commandment without restrictions, but it was eye-opening to read what HONOR really means.”

Quoting from her journal: “If we are to live as God commands, with him as our heavenly Father (parent), we must without hesitation give honor to our earthly parents. Honor is a word that gives the highest praise. This includes love, humility, respect, affection and loving care. We are to withhold no support or care they might need. Today it is sometimes impossible to care for aging parents within our home as Luther says. But, we still should be able to provide a place of dignity and treat them as such.” She goes on to say, “I was taken with Luther’s comments on persons other than birth parents serving in this role. Today they are teachers, mentors, foster parents and youth leaders. If children are taught to respect these persons as their parents many conflicts could be resolved. Because today they serve as caregivers while busy parents are working. I am in this capacity, assisting in the rearing of three girls and now, *their* children. They treat me as if I were their mother. In fact, they expressed they were lucky to have two mothers. My observation of life is that it is not necessary to be biologically connected to be a parent. Love and respect must flow both ways!

How the respondent saw Commandment #4 reflected in Commandment #1

This third respondent was “personally challenged by Luther’s reflections on the First Commandment. “To have a heart that receives and depends on God” is a gift. I think we are born with that heart. We already know and recognize and live that relationship with God. That relationship is nurtured by our parents as they teach us to honor God through our relationship with them. This nurturing leads us to continue that relationship with God through our parents. This is a gift we receive from them. “To have a God is to have something which the heart trusts completely.” This respondent also comments that Luther uses the words “cling to God.” The participant notes that “we cling to our parents when we’re afraid because we trust them. This trust is a gift of relationship given to a child. ‘Who do we run to in times of need, that is where our God is,’ writes Luther. As a child we run to our God, our parents —looking for good when we are in need. Our parents teach us to seek God through them. This is learned and is a gift. To be taught to honor our parents naturally leads us to want to be in relationship with them. Thus later wanting to be in relationship with God; because it is here, that we remember, that we *recognize*, that we *know*, God.”

4<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment #4:

Of Luther’s explanation to the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment this respondent writes, “There is very little in this writing that invites formation.” There were, however, phrases that caught his attention and caused him to ask, “What is this commandment asking of me.” He noted seven thoughts: “1.) Parents as God’s representatives; 2.)

When we think of our parents we are to think of the will of God; 3.) submit to parents; 4.) young people should give first place to this commandment; 5.) children would win their parent's heart completely; 6.) esteem parents as one through whom God reveals everything good; 7.) God is strict about punishing those who disobey."

This participant added these personal reflections: "I think this is a transition commandment from learning how to love God to learning how to love others. A child is taught how to be in relationship with God through honoring their parents. . . ." He goes on to add, "Reading Luther's writings forces me to look at my own beliefs about children's relationship with God. How do they receive this relationship? How do they know of it? They know of this loving God because God's Spirit lives within their parents. By leading our children to honor us as parents or guardians we are leading them to goodness. What a burden for this parent, always on the lookout for what is good for their child. Isn't that what God does for us always?"

In conclusion he writes, "Honor is taught through love only. This leads to a good life. This is a gift given to that child not a choice as Luther writes. A child later can choose to honor or not honor their parents later in life. Maybe that's what this commandment is about —honoring our parents as they and we get older. If this is the case then again, children do not carry the burden of following this commandment."

#### **How the respondent saw Commandment #4 reflected in Commandment #1**

This fourth respondent states that "true faith and confidence in God, the Father, and his teachings of love and obedience, is a guide for #4. If we honor God

(our heavenly Father) we must honor our earthly parents.” In closing she notes, “God has commanded us to do so according to his guidance and plan for our lives.”

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment # 4:

The part of the Luther’s text that this respondent found most valuable was Luther’s admonition to parents (409-10), reminding them to “devote serious attention to the young,” and to “bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God.” She found it off-putting that Luther seems to be asking for blind obedience, even though he was not obedient himself. She writes, “I can hardly think of President Bush who can’t eat a pretzel and watch TV at the same time as a father.”

In conclusion she writes, “The parts that I found most useful were the ones relating to myself as a parent and grandparent —trying to be sure that I honor (my children and grandchildren).”

#### How the respondent saw Commandment #4 reflected in Commandment #1

Here, the fifth respondent liked Luther’s comments on the 1<sup>st</sup> better than those on the 4<sup>th</sup>. She appreciated his comment: “require true faith and confidence of heart which fly straight to the one true God.” She also valued the thought that “this faith has nothing to do with our current status, etc.” Additionally, she liked the idea of “clinging to God with my heart.” She found the part about the pagan and idolatry “very apt for today.” She also commented that Luther’s words, “If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good . . .” were very strong and meaningful for her. She didn’t see much relationship between Luther’s comments on

the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup>. “I guess it is that if one is truly honoring his parents, he is honoring God also.”

**6<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment # 4:**

This participant writes, “Often I have thought that parents are the ones to whom is given a sacred duty to nurture children. To me, Luther brings a new idea that a ‘holy work is here assigned children’ —to honor their fathers and mothers. The whole family can be a dynamic microcosm of God’s world. Luther tells children to do this because it serves God and pleases Him. ‘Behold this work is pleasing to my God in heaven that I know for certain.’ And again, ‘... you should be heartily glad and thank God that He has chosen you and made you worthy to do a work so precious and pleasing to Him.’ When children take this to heart —“All would be well; for parents would have more joy, love, friendship and concord in their houses; thus children could captivate their parents’ hearts.” The children have an active part in the family by being able and capable of shaping the environment within the family, by creating love through obedience.

“It follows that if there is harmony in the family, it naturally spreads from generation to generation —and from the family to the community and to the society. We are encouraged to honor our civic leaders as ‘parents.’ Leaders are also entrusted to act like parents and take care of their civic ‘children.’”

Quoting Luther extensively, she notes that “everything is intended to guide us back to God, honoring and praising God. By obeying the Fourth Commandment, we are promised a reward, ‘so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your

God is giving you.’ This is one of two commandments where reward is offered, not punishment. It is also one of two positive commandments (thou *shalt* rather than thou *shalt not*.)

“After reading this commandment with the intention of spiritual formation rather than information only, I did experience a shift in attitude to my mother in particular. Where there has been strife, criticism, and conflict, there seemed to be an understanding, a sense of resolution and a feeling of well being. I am coming to an understanding of God’s holy charge to me as a child. I find myself wishing that I had been raised Lutheran and that my family had practiced Luther’s exercise of using the Larger (sic) Catechism, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer daily for meditation and prayer to direct us back to God.

“Obeying the commandments can be a burden or a relief. In reading Commandment #4, I can see that the commandments can be liberating once they are explained by Luther’s commentary and prayed as spiritual formation. I think the case is that most religious training is informative rather than formative. People get bored and lose interest. I found the text beneficial from a spiritually formative experience.”

How the respondent saw Commandment #4 reflected in Commandment #1

The sixth respondent notes that “from God comes all goodness and nurture. When evil comes, He protects us and secures us as a boat to the dock. He is the rope, the dock and the bumpers so the boat is tied up and doesn’t break apart from the battering. If we trust God to provide for us, He must give us what we need and we must trust what is given because it comes from God. He gives us parents as agents

acting on His behalf to take care of children. Hence we must trust and honor our parents because they are from God.” She quotes Luther:

*“For creatures are only the hands, channels, and means whereby God gives all things, as He gives to the mother breasts and milk to offer to her child, and corn and all manner of produce from the earth for nourishment, none of which blessings could be produced by any creature of itself.”*

In conclusion she suggests that “everything and everyone point us back to God. Parents (and the Ten Commandments) are like a Global Positioning System (GPS). They know where we are and when we’re off-track or lost, they can point us home, back to our starting point. She notes that Luther concludes “. . . where the heart is rightly disposed toward God and this commandment is observed, all the others follow.”



**FOURTH COMMANDMENT**  
*"You are to honor father and mother."*

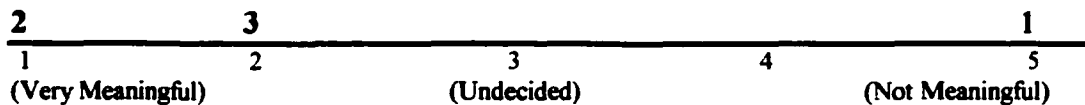
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**SURVEY RESPONSES**

**Total responses for this commandment: 6**

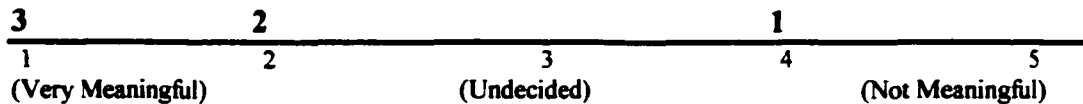
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents (in boldface):



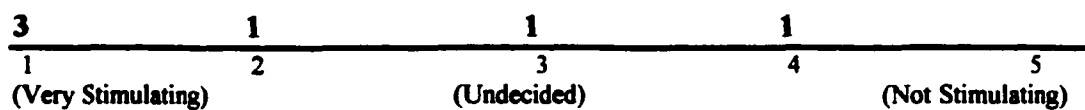
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

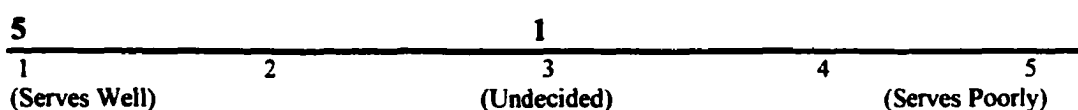
No. of respondents:



# FOURTH COMMANDMENT SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)

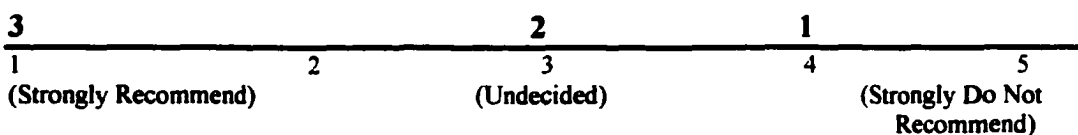
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:



## COMMANDMENT #5

*"You are not to kill."*

Two participants chose to respond to the Fifth Commandment.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandment #5

The first respondent comments on four phrases that caught her attention:

- 1) *"Wherever murder is forbidden, there also is forbidden everything that may lead to murder."*

"I appreciate Luther's recognition that murder and killing are usually not spontaneous acts that happen without the prior festering of anger, jealousy, hatred and so forth.

His reflection on the Fifth Commandment is that the best way to practice it is to cultivate a heart and spirit that would never take one down the path that leads to violence against another."

- 2) *"Finally our hearts should harbor no hostility or malice against anyone in a spirit of anger and hatred."*

"Again we see Luther talking about the inward habits that lead to violence. He sees anger, hatred, malice and hostility as those characteristics of human personality that also violate the Fifth Commandment. I have recently been reading Hindu and Buddhist writings on peace, and Luther's wisdom here is very similar to the wisdom of Eastern mystics and peace advocates."

- 3) *". . . for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved."*

"Luther takes the Fifth Commandment a step further by saying that it isn't just about killing, it is about withholding the love and care that persons need to be physically well. Concern for the well-being of others is the way to obey this commandment. It

isn't just a negative commandment saying, "don't do this," but it is also a positive commandment, "do this." He recognizes the interconnectedness of human life and names sinful behavior as the unwillingness to act according to the physical needs of all people. We are responsible when people die of hunger, toxic poisoning, and loneliness. We cannot wash our hands clean from the suffering of our brothers and sisters around the world as we sit in a nation filled with abundance."

4) *"Therefore it is God's real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies."*

"Here Luther connects the Fifth Commandment to Jesus' teaching in the New Testament to love our enemies. Luther isn't talking about a distant love or a loving from afar. Rather, he advocates a practice of kindness in tangible acts of love toward those who we would call enemies for whatever reason. If all people really tried to practice this simple but extremely challenging ethic, the world would be a radically different place."

In conclusion, she reflects, like other participants, on world events. "These four phrases are especially relevant in the current post September 11<sup>th</sup> context. Instead of demonizing Bin Laden and his crew, are we called to practice mercy, kindness and love even while we recognize the need to bring justice to the situation?"

#### How the respondent saw Commandment #5 reflected in Commandment #1

"The relationship between the First and Fifth Commandment comes in Luther's discussion of idols. The things that he calls idols —money and property,

boasting of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor —are all things that divide people and prevent relationships of love and kindness from developing. Idols create barriers between people and work against the interrelatedness and fundamental equality of all people.

“In contrast, when people do not have these idols, but instead put their full trust in God, opportunities for genuine love and kindness are more likely. When people realize that all has been created in the image of God and are loved by God, then they will be less likely to commit acts of violence against one another.”

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #5

This respondent found Luther’s words relevant in regard to the debate concerning the death penalty. She begins, “I was disappointed to read that in Luther’s eyes, the commandment does not apply to governmental officials. He seems to give these officials the status of “God’s representatives.” I believe we are in the final word, the government and we are the ones who allow this legal murder when capital punishment is the law of the land. Many nations have outlawed the death penalty, and the United States still practices this barbaric form of revenge killing. *The Death Penalty, a Social Statement of the ELCA* states the following: ‘we urge the abolition of the death penalty, and support alternative and appropriate punishment for capital crime, including the possibility of life sentence without parole.’

“Luther’s words about controlling our anger in all circumstances are good. His speaking to the actions of individuals when confronted with evil actions of others is interesting. Just thinking harmful thoughts can constitute murder. He wants us to

listen to the Holy Spirit and keep in our hearts that the evil should be turned over to God. He doesn't speak of self-defense or physically protecting someone who is being attacked. Would it be killing to stop someone from harming your child by killing that person?

"I love the section about sins of omission. We are murderers if we do not feed those who are hungry, or free the innocently condemned if we have the ability to do so. Feeding the hungry can be done in so many ways through advocacy. I love this phase, 'Therefore it is God's real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love.' In the next phrase he states this kindness should be directed especially toward our enemies. Are the terrorists our enemies? Does our government have to right to bomb our supposed enemies?

"Luther believes good works that come from the heart and are guided by our trust and faith in God are a good thing. Good works done as a show of piety or an abomination."

How this respondent saw Commandment #5 reflected in Commandment #1

"Luther spells it out in his Fifth Commandment commentary. He states, '(God) always wants to remind us to recall the First Commandment, that he is our God; that is, that God wishes to help, comfort and protect us, so that he may restrain our desire for revenge.' We are to put our hearts into God's hands and he will give us the strength needed to resist doing the evil that would be required to return even for evil.

“In the First Commandment, Luther states, ‘It is God alone from whom we receive everything good, and by whom we are delivered from all evil.’ This seems a bit simplistic, but it is at the very core of having only one God. God puts the proper tools in our hands when needed to help us escape evil. Trusting in anything but God is idolatry. God leads us to help our neighbor who is hungry or naked so that we do not kill by doing nothing. We must open our hearts to God’s guidance and God’s will shall be done through us.”

The respondent concluded with the following addendum:

“I think it would be an excellent idea to use (Luther’s *Large Catechism*) to study the commandments. I only read the First and Fifth because that is my area of interest at present. I was surprised how easily this could be used as a study for the death penalty and as an introduction for a study of advocacy. Used with the (ELCA) social statement on the death penalty and economic justice, there could be a great deal of discussion material.”

## FIFTH COMMANDMENT

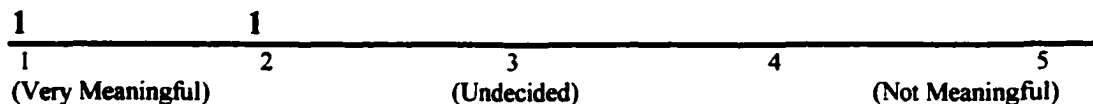
*"You are not to kill."*

## SURVEY RESPONSES

Total responses for this commandment: 2

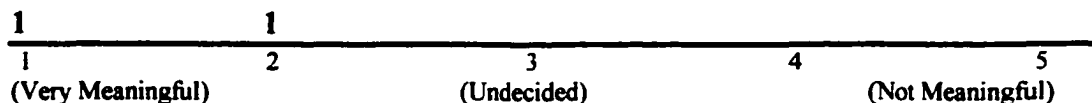
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents:



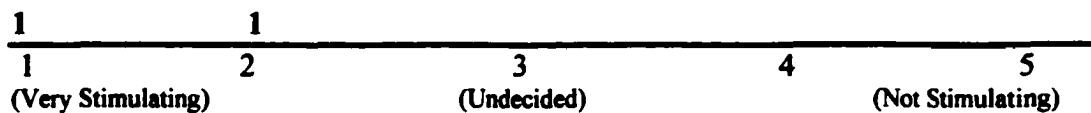
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

No. of respondents:

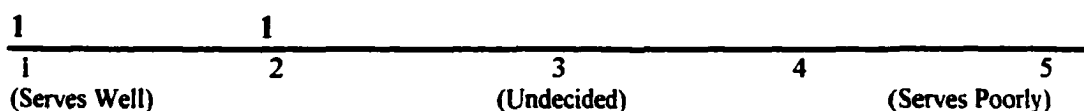




**FIFTH COMMANDMENT  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

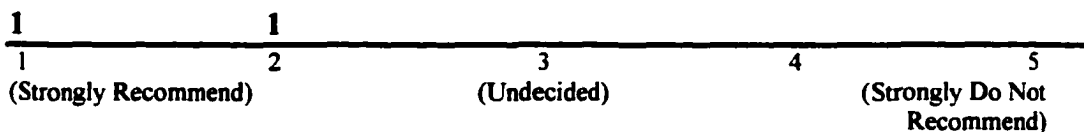
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:



**COMMANDMENT #6**  
*"You are not to commit adultery."*

Two participants chose to study Commandment #6.

**1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandment #6**

"I was surprised with the explanation on p. 414 that you should help your neighbor in what is needed. I had not seen such an interpretation before. I also liked Luther's explanation that the Sixth Commandment follows the fifth in that not only should I spare my neighbor's life, but also protect from harming his/her most important person who is his or her spouse.

"What I appreciate the most is to realize that marriage is the perfect state, created by God, to whom humans can aspire. It does mention the raising of children, but (only) as an effect of the spouses' mutual commitment to love.

"Reflection: I honestly believe Luther would have tolerated a same-sex relationship as long as it was based in love, mutual respect, and fidelity. The reasons are: First, Luther's response to marriage as a "work of life." Second, because God endowed marriage with "everything in the world." Third, Luther placed marriage in a higher echelon than a bishop. And fourth, because in his own words, . . . 'You are called to love and cherish the spouse whom God . . . ' has given you."

**How the respondent sees Commandment #6 reflected in Commandment #1**

"I think that Luther's definition of what is a 'god' (to trust what is good and gives us refuge) is fantastic to apply to the understanding of the Sixth Commandment. Because I should look at everything I have as a gift from God, not as a result of my

own effort or merit. Therefore, another person's spouse is his or her gift assigned by God; for me to take that gift away from the one it is assigned to is to steal from God.

"I also think the Sixth Commandment applies to the first on the concept of idolatry. It is so interesting that we refuse to follow God's commands, but follow blindly terrestrial things of no worth. I do love particularly Luther's analogy such as "If you are your own god (that is, self-sufficient), how come you do not create your own food? Things that no creature could produce by itself.'"

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #6

"Vitality in life is solely possible when people have healthy, supporting relationships on which they can depend," begins this respondent. "God provides the Sixth Commandment to preserve and protect the closest of associations that we have in our lives. But as Luther explains even further, God also desires purity in *all* of our involvements with each and *every* person around us. We are reminded to personally refrain from even the smallest of acts that might compromise our own integrity and/or that of our neighbors. Also, we are to proactively help others—to 'defend, protect, and rescue' those around us whenever possible. Instead of a simple, stern admonishment handed down from God, Luther expands our view to see the broad implications involved in this commandment. This is a crucial understanding for us in the world of today, in which our interactions with—and also influences on—others is immeasurable. How might our existence be transformed if we embraced God's will of genuine human connection? The prospects are amazing!

**“Luther begins his explanation of this commandment with the clarity that, besides personal injury, there is no greater vulnerability for a person —no way that a person can be hurt more —than by damage to the bond that exists with those who are closest to that person.**

**“Although adultery is mentioned specifically, Luther is clear that this is due to the fact that early marriage was a tradition among the Jews. ‘The most widespread form of unchastity’ happened to be adultery, which clearly needed to be addressed. Luther explains, however, that this commandment is directed at ‘every form of unchastity.’ Any outward act is clearly not acceptable, but equally a problem is any facilitating influences or circumstances that may encourage such an act.**

**“In and with every part of our being —‘heart, lips and entire body’ we are to be chaste. We are to acknowledge this for ourselves, and very importantly —we are to assist our neighbors to do likewise. Luther states that we are responsible for these people. We must help them ‘whenever they are in danger or need, and, moreover, even aid and assist them so that they may retain their honor.’ We must do whatever is in our power to intervene and attempt to set them on the right path, away from unchaste behavior. If we do not, we are ‘just as guilty as the culprit who commits the act.’ The counsel of this commandment, then, is that each one of us must fully and actively participate in honoring and protecting that which is important to God.**

**“Luther takes the opportunity here to speak at length to the honorable status of marriage as a ‘walk of life,’ ‘divine and blessed,’ and even ‘necessary’ —having been ‘solemnly commanded by God.’ This seems too, to have been emphasized at least**

partially in response to the issues of the time. Married life had lost its ‘proper honor’ and was being shunned by many, including —most notably to Luther —the ‘papal crowd.’ For Luther, their vows of chastity, which he believed were insufficient outside of marriage (in their ability to control ‘unchaste thoughts and evil desires’) were ‘condemned and annulled’ by this commandment. Luther hoped to restore a desire among young people to embrace a life respectful of marriage and, in so doing, lessen the ‘shameful vices’ and ‘disorderly conduct’ that had become widespread.

“In Luther’s day there were many reasons to espouse the benefits of marriage as a way to address the needs of people and solve the ills of society. However, the benefit of marriage which Luther points to as being ‘of utmost importance’ to God is the rearing of children. It is in the family setting that persons could be nurtured and ‘be brought up to serve the world’ with a ‘knowledge of God, godly living, and all virtues.’ When we focus on Luther’s closing paragraph, the reason for this being possible is quite obvious. As he states, ‘[I]t is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity.’ It is Luther’s intent here to make clear how necessary this is to the fulfillment of the simply stated aim of God’s Sixth Commandment. Chastity is not only possible at this point, but ‘follows spontaneously.’ But what is also clear is that we as humans could not have a more compelling model of God’s love for us, than that shared between two people who are determined to ‘love and honor each other.’ Children in such an environment would naturally understand and gravitate towards the life that God would choose for us all.

**“Luther’s concentration on the divine status of marriage is heartening, especially in a day when so many choose to disregard its merits. There are many words that stand out here: marriage ‘is a glorious institution and an object of God’s serious concern’; God ‘wishes us to honor, maintain, and cherish it as a divine and blessed walk of life’ and ‘has therefore blessed this walk of life most richly, above all others’; and it is on a higher level than all other walks of life, ‘the most universal and noblest.’ Clearly, marriage is to be considered worthy of our ‘serious concern’ as well.**

**“However, what seems to ring true loudly through the ages, is the importance of fidelity in whatever relationships we find ourselves. Luther reminds us that St. Paul ‘so urgently admonishes married couples to love and honor each other.’ At a time when we have layer upon layer of interwoven connections with other people throughout the world, it behooves us all to base our dealings with each other; no matter what relation we share, on this precept. If we are to be true to the will of God, we must be true to every person. If indeed this were paramount in our interactions, there would be ample opportunity to nurture children properly, as God would have it. Inside and outside the family structure they would be encouraged, guided, and brought ‘up to the glory of God.’ We might *all* be made able to ‘follow spontaneously without any command’, the path of loyalty and perfect fidelity to each other, and to God.”**

How the respondent saw Commandment #6 in relation to Commandment #1

“‘True faith and confidence of the heart’, Luther explains, ‘fly straight to the one true God.’ Therefore, he maintains, if we can master this concept and incorporate it into our daily living, we should have no difficulty in our observance of the remaining commandments. This is clearly true as we consider the sixth:

“God wishes to enhance our lives and allow us a fulfilling existence. We are given countless opportunities to be in relationship with other people to this end. Do we seize the chance to make the most of these incidents? Do we deal with others with integrity? Do we persevere, especially when things become difficult? Do we do our best to respond to the needs of those around us?

“The difficulties we face in dealing with others can create a great amount of unrest for us. (God can’t possibly expect us to put-up with and/or even care about *these people!* Can God? . . .!!!) If we do not withdraw from the challenge before us but instead have confidence in God’s will, the value of these interactions will be made clear.

“Without a true faith in God, we might easily choose to shun, or not even recognize our responsibilities to those with whom we live. Trusting in God, and allowing God to guide us into deeper relationship with one another will strengthen us—and others, beyond measure. Our faith allows us to personally fulfill God’s commandment *and* be instrumental in allowing others to experience, first hand, the blessings of ‘the one true God.’

**“Luther explains God’s promise: ‘I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger.’ Can we trust this? Even when things look totally bleak? Do we each refrain our heart from fixing ‘its gaze upon other things’ and seeking ‘help and consolation’ elsewhere?**

**“We will not need to look further than to those God has entrusted to us, if we believe God’s promise. It may often appear to us that we have been given ‘the short end of the stick,’ that there is little of value in life. Those whom we are with currently may appear to be the greatest part of the problem. If only we could reach out further to someone else, to something better.**

**“If our expectations are focused on the good that God has in store, this is unnecessary. If we are responding to our families, our neighbors—all whom we are in contact with—in love and truth, as God requires of us, our needs will surely be met.**

**“Luther teaches that we must each train our heart to: care for God; expect good things from God ‘sufficiently to trust’ that God wants to help; and recognize and believe “that whatever good it encounters comes from God. We must recognize the gifts of God and give thanks. We must reach out and embrace those God has given us with love, honor and truth. We then, most certainly, will come to realize all that God has blessed us with.**

**“It seems to be our nature to want to be in control. Luther states that ‘all people have set up their own god.’ We want to be the one to choose where we will**



find our ‘blessings, help, and comfort.’ We tend to believe that our insights, abilities, and influence will reap the reward that we *actually* need.

“Committing ourselves to what God desires for us and requires of us, can seem not only difficult, but limiting as well. There are so many opportunities that arise, so many other options to pursue. Not surprisingly, these things can seem so simple, so clear —so attractive! This is especially true at the moments when life is challenging. We want so much to run from the confusion and to hide from the complications.

“Yet, as Luther states, God ‘wishes to turn us away from everything else’ that is not God, because God ‘is the one, eternal good.’ If our heart can become centered on God, we will begin to experience the boundlessness that is truly there for us with God. The love and truth that God asks of us will be directed back to us through the many relationships we have already been given. It then will be clear to us how empty our personal aspirations can be, compared with God’s.”

**SIXTH COMMANDMENT**  
*"You are not to commit adultery."*

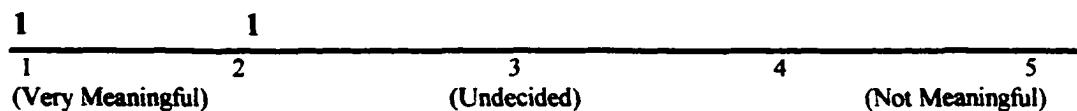
**SURVEY RESPONSES**

**Total responses for this commandment: 2**

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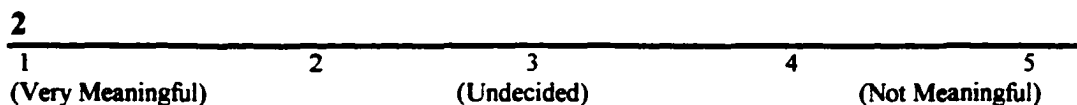
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?**

No. of respondents:



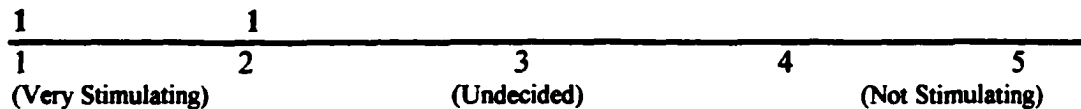
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?**

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?**

No. of respondents:



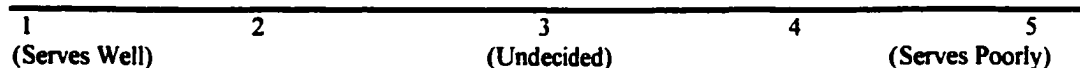
**SIXTH COMMANDMENT  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:

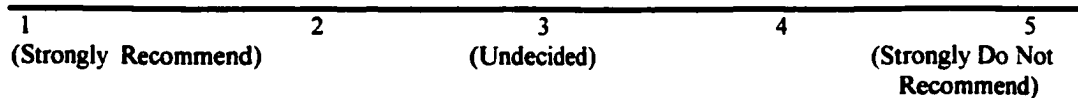
**2**



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents"

**2**



**COMMANDMENT #7**  
*"You are not to steal."*

Two respondents were requested to respond to Commandment #7 because no one chose to reflect on it.

**1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandment #7**

"I have to be honest. I was not as pleased with Luther's treatment with this commandment as I was with the others that I read. I looked at Luther's explanations of several of the commandments, and much of what he had to say is as relevant today as—or maybe even more so than—it was in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. However, a few passages jarred these 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears. I would like to discuss these problems, as well as the things that do resonate today, paragraph by paragraph.

"First things first: I have a confession to make. During my own prayer and meditation, I will often make a mental inventory of my sins to confess to God. In doing this, I frequently run through the Ten Commandments, ticking them off as I ask for forgiveness for each one I've violated. When I get to number seven, it's easy for me to say, "Oh, I haven't stolen anything, so I'm ok on that one." According to Luther's *Large Catechism*, I'm missing the mark.

"No, I am not a kleptomaniac. I'm not on the lam from a bank heist. I haven't even shoplifted a small item from a grocery store (i.e., eating a grape as I wander through the aisles). But that's not the only thing covered under this commandment. Luther says, '... stealing is not just robbing someone's safe or pocketbook but also

taking advantage of someone . . . wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or services.’ [224]

“How many pens, pencils, or pads of paper have I brought home from work without accounting for them? How often have I said nothing when a cashier undercharged me for an item, or gave me too much change in return? Such things are stealing, as much as breaking into a person’s home and taking their belongings.

“I have no qualms with Luther’s accusations of my faults in this respect. What feels odd about his explanation of this commandment is his focus on the ‘working classes.’ As early as the second paragraph, Luther goes into a tirade against servants, which really has no application today. His first sentence: ‘We shall make this a bit clearer to the common people, so that they may see how upright we are.’ [225, emphasis added] Maybe I’m misunderstanding it, or maybe there’s a problem in the translation, but that seems condescending. Aren’t the masters as guilty as their servants of cheating? Maybe I reveal myself as a communist when I say I think modern employers are often even more guilty of cheating their employees than the other way around; and even if it weren’t true today, I think it was certainly true 500 years ago.

“Luther does hint at this ‘organized crime’ sanctioned by governments later, around reference 230, but I don’t think he gives it the attention it deserves, considering his harsh words to the lower classes. He offers some words of comfort to the disadvantaged who have been cheated: ‘The poor are defrauded every day, and

new burdens and higher prices are imposed.’ But this sentence is overshadowed by the sharp criticism of those same classes in the previous seven paragraphs.

‘I’m also taken aback, a little, at his words in reference 243:

*Indeed, we have the evidence before our eyes every day that no stolen or ill-gotten possession thrives. How many people are there who scrape and scratch day and night and are not even a penny richer? Even though they amass a great amount, they have to suffer so many troubles and misfortunes that they can never enjoy it or pass it on to their children.*

“This almost sounds like works righteousness: ‘If you steal from others, God will punish you by keeping you poor,’ is but a short step from ‘if you don’t steal, God will bless you with wealth.’ Even more disturbing is the ultimate conclusion such a statement forces. Those who suffer financial hardships have brought it upon themselves through some sin and are being punished by God for their actions. I don’t doubt that this is the case from time to time —maybe even more often than not. However, to imply that everyone with financial troubles is being punished by God for taking things that aren’t theirs seems not only like bad theology but also quite against what I thought Luther was all about.

“Nevertheless, Luther does help us to realize that we are guilty of stealing, even if we think we are not. For this reason, the explanation is helpful and appropriate for modern audiences, although I would recommend some major editing and footnotes for use in a Sunday School or Adult Forum setting.”

**How the respondent saw Commandment #7 reflected in Commandment #1**

“How does stealing break the First Commandment? We know that stealing hurts our neighbor and that is, according to Jesus, the second most important commandment. But how does it hurt God? Easy. In the *Small Catechism*, Luther explains the First Commandment by saying, ‘We are to fear, love, and trust God above anything else.’ [emphasis added] If we steal, we are not trusting God to provide for us. We are saying, ‘I can’t count on God to give me what I need, so I’d better steal it.’

“Luther says that our God is that, whatever it may be, in which we put our trust. When we steal, we make ourselves gods, putting our trust in our own abilities to take things that don’t belong to us.

“If we put our whole faith and trust, however, in the One True God, we know that God will provide whatever we need. We pray it every day when we say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We know that, while we may have to work, and work hard, for what we need, God will make it available to us without resorting to dishonest means.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #7**

The respondent began with a personal observation that the reading of this commandment caused her to reflect on her relationship with her employer. She then continues, “I am struck by how often Luther brings up the poor in this commandment. Just as he comments that God doesn’t consider this commandment a ‘joke,’ it’s clear that Luther is not joking about our duty to care for the poor. I would find it helpful to

know more about the historical context here, as I got confused when he referred to three 'groups' of people (I think). The poor, the wealthy/princes/government and 'we'. Sometimes I see myself in the 'we' and sometimes in the wealthy group. Both are helpful and good for me to reflect on, but would still be nice to know where Luther was coming from.

"Before this devotion exercise, I would have said this was one of the easiest commandments to keep, as it felt more black and white. Now, I'm thinking about all the gray areas of my life!

"God seems so harsh and punishing in this section of the Catechism. God's blessing 'which is really a curse [line 242] for those who steal' doesn't necessarily ring true in our times. But it could be an interesting discussion group to talk about this commandment in terms of America's economy, stock market . . . Enron?

*"Anyone who seeks and desires good works will find here more than enough things to do that are heartily acceptable and pleasing to God."*

"I especially like this quote of Luther's because regardless of what I didn't understand or care for in this devotion, I can focus on this."

**How this respondent saw Commandment #7 reflected in Commandment #1**

"Luther understood the First Commandment as a summary and fulfillment of all other commandments.

*"Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me."*



“That about covers it, doesn’t it? I love the image of clinging to God, letting all else fall away. It seems very simply to follow the Seventh Commandment if we are clinging to God alone! There would be no temptation to steal, if we truly relied on God for everything.

“Within the First Commandment discussion, Luther talk about the god mammon, so the connection to Commandment Seven is easy to make: *This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.* More clinging imagery.

*“No one, therefore, should presume to take or give anything unless God has commanded it. This forces us to recognize God's gifts and give him thanks, as this commandment requires.”*

“I steal when I presume that I know God's ways better than God and then take something I think I deserve more than my neighbor. If I skip the First Commandment, forgetting to recognize all as a gift from God, and forgetting to give thanks, then oh, yikes! I am probably going to break the Seventh Commandment.”

## SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

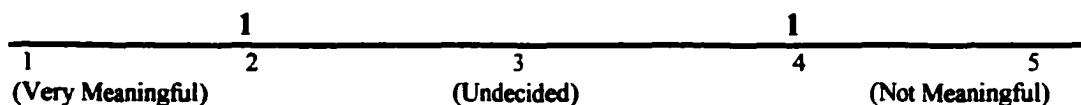
*"You are not to steal."*

## SURVEY RESPONSES

Total responses for this commandment: 2

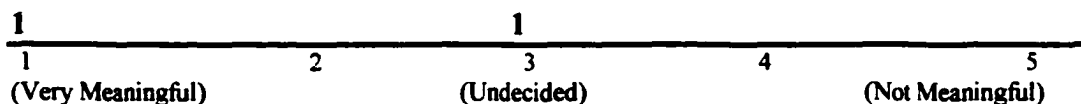
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents:



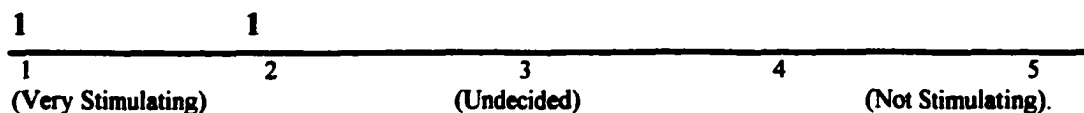
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

No. of respondents:

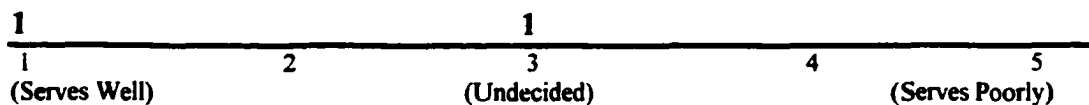


**SEVENTH COMMANDMENT  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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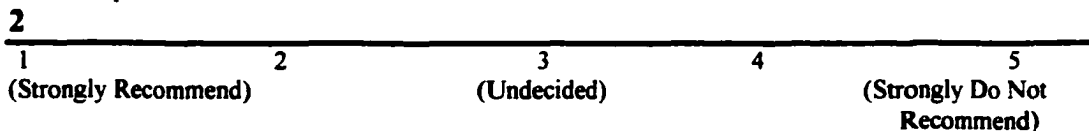
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents"



# COMMANDMENT #8

*"You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor."*

Five participants chose to respond to the Eighth Commandment.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandment #8

"Luther says it's both a treasure and a right to have our honor & good reputation. He also says, "For honor and good name are easily taken away, but not easily restored."

"Re: paragraph 258 – 259. This sounds very *current*: 'a poor man is inevitably oppressed' and 'seldom do people of integrity preside in courts of justice.'

The three applications are still true today:

- 1) 'All people should help their neighbors maintain their legal right.'
- 2) Although Luther has some of his own baggage here, it's still true that the *prophetic voice* should be protected.
- 3) 'All sins of the tongue by which we may injure or offend our neighbor.'

"Re: paragraphs 267-268 I love his description of 'back biters' as 'pigs in manure,' etc. It's a fun example of holy Martin Luther's wonderful humanity. Also paragraph 282: 'It serves such big mouths right . . . .'

"Re: page 423 1) He gives healthy exceptions to the rule.

- 2) He outlines the 'biblically correct' right way to do it.

"Re: Paragraph 288-289 Sounds very current and helpful to 'put the best construction on all we hear about our neighbors.'"

**How this respondent saw Commandment #8 reflected in Commandment #1**

**“I think Luther’s commentary on the First Commandment is very readable for people today —and helpful for spiritual formation.**

**“He says on page 389 that our neighbor has been commanded by God to give us good —that includes our ‘honor and good name.’ And we are commanded to treat our neighbors likewise.**

**“Luther writes on page 422, paragraph 274 that ‘(God) warns in the First Commandment, he has reserved to himself the right of punishment.’ So we are not to punish others through gossip.**

**“At the bottom of page 389, Luther writes that we are not to ‘seek other methods and ways (to get good) from those God commanded. For that would not be receiving them from God, but seeking them for ourselves.’**

**“Much of our motivation to bear false witness is to manipulate outcomes that we think are good for ourselves or for others, I think.”**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #8**

**“I found nothing ‘out of sync’ and/or ‘off-putting’ about this commandment. If anything it is even more relevant and important in our modern day world with our communication explosion. The press takes all our sources for news, put it out for us to consume, many times without verification, and blows it up to gigantic proportions.**

**“More to the point is what we as individuals do with those we deal with in every day situations. We pass on unpleasant news, repeat stories given to us and add**

more to what we discuss. The explanation given by Luther could have been written today. Examples of this I found in the following statements.

*"And it is a common misfortune in the world that seldom do people of integrity preside in courts of justice".*

*"... everyone would rather hear evil than good about their neighbors."*

*"Yet we cannot bear it when someone says the best things about others".*

*"For honor and good name are easily taken away but not easily restored."*

"Since beginning these readings, I have had personal experience in seeing how difficult it is not to gossip and deal on the personalities of others. Doing the readings has made me very much aware of trying to do better in our thought of our 'neighbor' and in the types of things that we say about them."

#### How the respondent saw Commandment #8 reflected in Commandment #1

The respondent did not reflect on Commandment #1's relation to this commandment.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #8:

*"Therefore God does not want our neighbors deprived of their reputation, honor and character."*

"This statement is at the heart of what I glean from the commandment. This is so at two levels: the personal and the global. The personal calls me to examine and take seriously the ways in which backbiting and slander insidiously destroy, at least undermine community in the congregation. I ask how might these attacks be addressed using the suggestions of discipline Luther draws from Matthew. At the

global level, I see the relevance of this commandment applied to the ways in which we depersonalize and vilify whole peoples by denying them their humanity. The best of the catechism calls me to be compassionate, forthright, and active in speaking well of my neighbor.”

**How this respondent saw Commandment #8 reflected in Commandment #1**

- √Connects with the tendency to use ‘learning, wisdom, power, and prestige’ as a means of power over others. Trusting and believing in these to keep others in places of no account.
- The commandment calls us to a humility before God and others.
- Calls me to recognize that, ‘all creatures are the hands and means through which God bestows all blessings.’”

**4<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment #8**

“Here, Luther mentions that God wishes us to value our *"honor and reputation"* and refers to them as a *"treasure."* Upon first reading, these concepts caught me off guard. I’m not sure that many of us give much, if any thought, to our honor nowadays – or our neighbor's reputation in today’s ‘information age.’ We are consumed with the private lives of celebrities, be they movie stars, sports figures, or politicians. One need look no further than Tom Cruise (with persistent gossip about his orientation), President Clinton (and his many loves), or Magic Johnson’s HIV status (How did he get it? How many women did he sleep with?) to realize we are not only consumed with public gossip, but claim a democratic ‘right to know’ it! Luther’s comments are timely for us not only as individuals but also as citizens and

may benefit today's Christian by further examination of their own role in public gossip, as well as gossip about others in their own lives.

*"There is a very great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. . . . I have no command to tell others about it."*

"As a Christian with a gay orientation, I cannot help but relate this to my own experience at being labeled 'a sinner' by my own brothers and sisters in Christ in other expressions of the Church. My temptation is to judge them, to cut myself off from the expression of their 'brand' of the faith. But Luther's comment that *"to tell others about it"* would cause us to *"fall into a greater sin than that of my neighbor"* is a challenge and reminder of just what it means to love your neighbor as yourself and merits further inspection (introspection) by all of us.

*"The first application of this commandment, then, is that all people should help their neighbors maintain their legal rights."*

"Throughout Luther implies that obeying this commandment has a lot to do with being a responsible citizen, a good member of one's community. We are not to lie in court against our neighbor, we are to help our neighbor maintain his/her legal rights, we are to testify in courts truthfully, and have a duty to do so. So does this mean that if I ignore a jury summons from the municipal court, I am breaking the Eighth commandment? We live in a twenty-first century democracy unlike anything Luther could have imagined, but I think there are still lessons to learn here. What is our role as individual Christians to the greater community? To the country? I think his later statement answers these questions when he says,



*"Likewise, although no one personally has the right to judge and concern anyone, yet if they are commanded to do so and fail to do it, they sin as much as those who take the law into their own hands apart from any office."*

"Of course, this assumes that justice flows from God through judges and magistrates in a just society and that we might be instruments of this justice.

(Interestingly, the same can hardly be said for politically repressive regimes like the former Soviet Union, or more recently, the Afghani Taliban, but Luther deals with unjust judges in this commandment as well.)

*"Next, it (the commandment) extends much further when it is applied to spiritual jurisdiction or administration."*

"I have re-read this passage several times, and have had difficulty with it. This is where formative reading gets put to the test! But since it is the purpose of this study to point out those areas that seem antiquated, the language here is most difficult. I don't believe we would say what he is saying today the way he says it here. (Does that make any sense?) If I understand him correctly he is saying that persecution of Christians (and using God's word to do so) is a sin that the world may not recognize, but it is still a sin in God's eyes.

*"The third aspect of this commandment, which applies to all of us, forbids all sins of the tongue by which we may injure or offend our neighbor. 'Bearing false witness' is nothing but a work of the tongue."*

"He really nails it, doesn't he? This is very insightful and, to those who would study this commandment today, sheds new light on this commandment's meaning.

*"Now we have the summary and substance of this commandment: No one shall use the tongue to harm a neighbor, whether friend or foe. . . . Our chief reason for doing this is the one that Christ has given in*

*the Gospel, and in which he means to encompass all the commandments concerning our neighbors, 'In everything do to others as you would have them to you.'"*

"Brilliant. In one fell stroke, he wraps this commandment and all others into the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and gives us not only food for thought and reflection, but an entire banquet!"

"I have read Luther's commentary on the Eighth Commandment over a dozen times, moving from information to formation, as suggested by the author of this study and have found there is much here for reflection and guidance. Except where I have noted, I found much of this writing to be relevant and accessible to a contemporary Christian like myself, surprisingly so. It is certainly an un-mined spiritual resource, full of riches and wisdom."

#### How the respondent saw Commandment #8 reflected in Commandment #1

"Aside from what the author of this study states above, a reflection of the Eighth Commandment was not as readily apparent to me in this First Commandment. It was the hardest part of this exercise, but well worth it! (I think part of my hindrance in seeing the connection were Luther's repeated comments about Roman Catholicism, i.e.: saints, supererogatory works, the papacy, etc.) Upon further study, however, (of the formative type!) Luther clearly states that the one, true God—a god in *"which the heart trusts completely (and) wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good."* Everything else. These are the words that jump out at me. Because a part of this 'everything else' is the evil work of our tongues, the disregard of our neighbors, and

our inability to love our brothers and sisters as ourselves. Therefore, if we love God, and S/he is truly our one, true God, we will find no difficulty in fulfilling the Eighth Commandment (and all the rest) for our heart and soul will let us do no other. This is the gist of it, I think.”

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment #8

“This image of a fearless witness catches my fancy. It seems to me a double-edged sword, especially coming from Luther. I think there is a call to take it farther than he does. One must be willing to say what one has to say without regard to the consequences. I understand that. But it seems to me that one also has to be fearless in being willing NOT to say anything if that is what is needed or we are unsure. The duty is both ways, and we can only leave the consequences to God. We must ‘testify boldly.’

“This is a risky business that is about living in the truth, though. If God is anything we can understand at all, then truth or the deepest reality seems to be a part of it. Anything that leads us into illusion and deception takes us farther from God, from life, and from ourselves.

“It is hard enough to try to get to the truth about ourselves. It is even harder to understand the truth about others because it is almost impossible to understand another person’s experience, to really put us in their place. Even as we make the same journey, live in the same places and through the same events and share lives with one another, we are also each so unique in our experiences that it is impossible to walk in another’s shoes. That makes truth-discerning very complex, at best. The

temptation is to assume that the other is just like us—but they never are, never could be. How can I connect my truth and my interpretations with their experiences and realities? When should I hold up truth to someone else, when is the responsible thing to keep quiet? I may have a critical insight that they or others need to hear. I may also just be a distraction that takes them farther from where they need to be.

“I am very uncomfortable with Luther’s call to avoid ‘judging or reproving’ even ‘after having seen a sin committed. . . .,’ with the idea that ‘what is secret should be left secret.’ Can we really ‘do nothing but turn your ears into a tomb?’ Is a low profile personal intervention enough in some situations? How does that speak to things like drugs, terrorism, sexual or physical abuse of children or women? Maybe it is a difference of time and context, but I do not think we can avoid our co-creative and co-compassionate responsibilities this way. If we are to strive to be God’s hands and heart in this world, we cannot stand idly by in the face of such things. Maybe ‘sins’ that do no harm to others, if there is such a thing in this deeply interdependent creation in which we exist, can be ignored, but there are categories of actions that demand intervention, that demand fearless responses.

“It seems to me that Luther’s words here could easily become a rationalization for not ever intervening. But we have a Word inside of us, a God-given truth that may need to be shared to give the possibility of life to another. An intervention with an alcoholic might be a good example. In such situations, I think we have an obligation to bear witness fearlessly, understanding the risk that we could be wrong. Maybe that is to say that bearing witness to the truth may be as much an imperative as

not bearing false witness. Jesus told people those truths —and the fearful ones killed him rather than listen. This is not easy or cheap.”

**How the respondent saw Commandment #8 reflected in Commandment #1**

“Luther talks about God as that in which we place our trust, that to which we look for refuge. I believe that any enlightened life has to be lived in a search for truth or reality, has to be lived as close to or as fully as possible in alignment with “the way life is.” Most idols are created out of unreality to address our fears and discomforts —creating the illusion of power, the illusion of security, the illusion of love, the illusion of control, etc. Reality is a humbling thing. We are not really in control of anything. We are not really safe. We are utterly dependent. We are not alive or able to appreciate the wonders and gifts that are given if we are not grounded in the reality of our lives.

“If this search for and desire to live in ‘truth,’ to be in touch with the way life really is, is an essential part of any spiritual journey, then the passionate truthfulness of witnessing (and not witnessing) faithfully and honestly and fearlessly is an essential part of that journey and that life.”

## EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

*"You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor."*

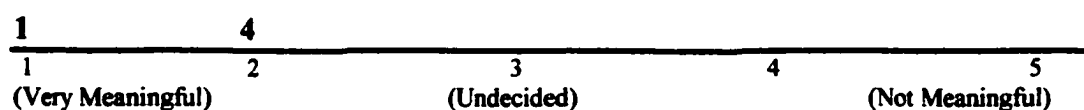
## SURVEY RESPONSES

Total responses for this commandment: **5**

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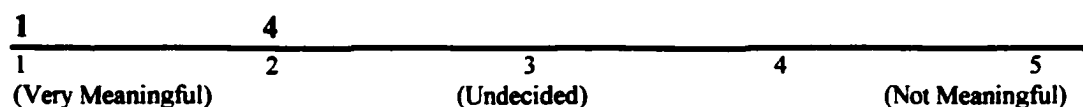
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?

No. of respondents:



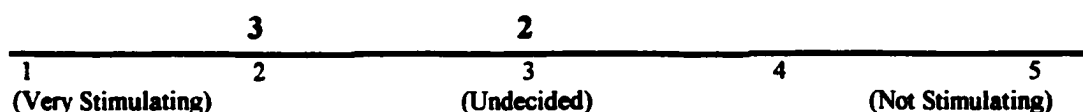
- 2) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?

No. of respondents:



- 3) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?

No. of respondents:

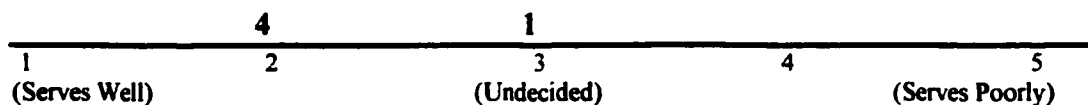


**EIGHTH COMMANDMENT  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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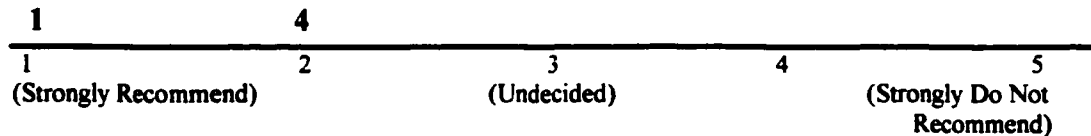
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:



### COMMANDMENTS #9 & #10

*"You are not to covet your neighbor's house"*

*"You are not to cover his wife, male or female servants, cattle, or whatever is his."*

*(Note: Luther deals with the Ninth and Tenth Commandments simultaneously in his writings, and the respondents were asked to do likewise in their journals.)*

Five respondents chose to comment on Commandments Nine and Ten.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Respondent to Commandments #9 and #10

'The more things change, the more they stay the same. If I didn't know better, I never would have guessed that Luther's discussion on these commandments was written five hundred years ago. It seems that Christians in the sixteen-century were much like Christians today.

"Of course, there's some sexist language that may seem jarring to a modern reader who is used to political correctness. The commandments themselves are clearly addressed to men and not women (otherwise it would say 'your neighbor's spouse'), and the translator has not gone out of his way to modernize Luther's gender-specific language. Aside from this, the article could have easily been written yesterday.

"What is 'covet?' In all honesty, I think the only time I've encountered the word is in these commandments. When I was in confirmation class, I was told that 'covet' is a little worse than 'envy. But, rather than being an archaic term to describe an archaic attitude, I find from this discourse that it is still alive and well in the world today.



**“Today, aren’t people praised who have come by wealth or riches through tricky yet legal means? The state-run lotteries. Keeping up with the Jones’s. Tax loopholes and million dollar legal settlements.**

**“What struck me most was reference #307, quoted here:**

***“God does not want you to deprive your neighbors of anything that is theirs, so that they suffer loss while you satisfy your greed, even though before the world you can retain the property with honor.... It might not be called stealing or cheating, but it is coveting. . . that is, having designs on your neighbor's property, luring it away from them against their will, and begrudging what God gave them.”***

**How the respondent saw Commandment #9 & 10 reflected in Commandment #1**

**“The 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Commandments on coveting relate very directly to the first. Luther says that our God is that, whatever it may be, in which we put our trust. Those who put their trust in material things —mammon —need to find ways to obtain more of it. If we are forbidden by direct laws from stealing those things (the Seventh Commandment as well as secular laws), we may think we have no choice but to ‘sneak’ things away. We covet things, because they are our gods.**

**“If we put our whole faith and trust, however, in the One True God, then what do we need with other things? We know that God will provide whatever we need, for we pray it every day when we say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We know that, while we may have to work, and work hard, for what we need, God will make it available to us without resorting to dishonest means.**

**‘To covet is to forsake God, to make whatever ‘thing’ you covet your god.”**

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #9 & #10

"I'm struck by how open and honest Luther is about our concealments, i.e.: conceal our villainy.

"It appears that Luther suffers from coveting, also, and I feel somehow relieved to read this. It's refreshing to discover that a great theologian battled with the same issues that I struggle with. It helps me to accept my sinful nature.

"I appreciated this phrase:

*Above all, (God) wants the heart to be pure, even though, as long as we live here, we cannot accomplish that.*

"I feel humbled by the phrase, but at the same time, cherished and embraced by God."

## How the respondent saw Commandments #9 & #10 reflected in Commandment #1

"Commandment #9 follows nicely from the First Commandment. When I covet things or envy others, I am making false idols. As Luther says, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your god." And, "See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another."

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Respondent to Commandment #9 and #10

Although English is not this respondent's first language, he very eloquently comments that "the law of God is for the heart of human beings."

"The explanation made by Luther in the first paragraph of this commandment updates clearly its value for today's understanding. Perhaps there is archaic language that it is not easy to determine for me since English is not my first language. nevertheless, the translation that I read in Spanish is very actual and understandable. Even the examples of practical cases are actual.

**“It is very impressive how actual (for today) Luther’s comment on the Ninth and Tenth Commandments are. Describing human condition: ‘Such is human nature that no one wants someone else to have as much as he or she does. Everyone tries to accumulate as much as he or she can, and lets others look out for themselves.’ Is it not what our modern (post modern) society does for the sake of individualism in a competitive set?**

**“It uncovers the mask of reputation and hypocrisy. ‘This commandment, therefore, is not addressed to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but to the most upright – to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous’ (300). I see Latin-American politicians and people of authority quoting this or that law to justify themselves for their hidden wickedness. The legal systems of the world where money (and power) determines the nature of justice (301). I see this not only in Third World countries, but also the First World.”**

**“The law of God is for the heart of human beings,” concludes the respondent in his own words.**

**How the respondent saw Commandment #9 and #10 reflected in Commandment #1**

**This respondent did not reflect on similarities between Commandments #9 & #10 to Commandment #1.**

**4<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment #9 and #10**

**“Luther focuses on an aspect of these commandments that becomes key for St. Paul. He says ‘intending or scheming’ to take something from your neighbor even though it could be done ‘honorably’ causes the neighbor harm. Therefore the intent,**

which is internal, becomes equal to the act or actions that might be manifested by such desires. For Paul, the internal metamorphosis (Age of the Spirit Rom. 8) is key to living our lives as Christians. Further, it is clear to me that the Sermon on the Mount merely expands on this call for an internal change for Jesus' followers to exceed the law and live lives of righteousness. (Matt. 5:17-20)

“Luther’s observation on greed and manipulation of the legal system is surprisingly contemporary. He writes of our blindness to the needs of our own neighbors who may be taken advantage of. Isn’t it true that in a global economy, many of our first world comforts are paid for on the back breaking labor of exploited others whom we do not see and therefore ignore. We covet what they can provide for us.

“Luther’s writing could be easily applied to the culture of materialism so many of us fall victim to. He admonishes us that God ‘wants the heart to be pure’ and sets forth this commandment to remind us of that.

How the respondent saw Commandments #9 & #10 reflected in Commandment #1

“It is easy to relate the Ninth Commandment to the commentary to the First Commandment —Luther writes specifically about idolatry and notes man’s (human’s) desire for wealth. He notes that idolatry means that we set our hearts on something other than God, when in fact ‘you lay hold of God when your heart grasps and clings to him.’ (section 14)

“Luther wrote that the these commandments are written for the ‘most upright’ (sec. 300). Yet trusting in ‘great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor’ does not equal trust in ‘the one true God.’ (sec. 10)

“So to live clinging to God with one’s heart, and not focused on money, possessions, family, would eliminate these ‘false gods’ and embrace, trust and belief in one true God.’

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Respondent to Commandment #9 and #10

This participant saw these commandments in terms of property rights, corporation rights, and American injustice toward indigenous peoples.

“Luther speaks truth to the powerful in the reflection of the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. What came to my mind upon pondering his diatribe are two facts of contemporary American life that most mainstream ‘good’ people accept without question. 1) our right to possession of the land in the U.S. and 2) corporations’ right to destroy public lands and resources and endanger public health in the name of profit.

“First, I shall quote from Luther those phrases that stood out for me, then I shall juxtapose selections from several books to illustrate my points more specifically.

Luther: *‘guise of justice,’ ‘our neighbors’ plight,’ ‘real estate,’ ‘appearance of legality,’ ‘gain such a title to the property,’ ‘harass the person until they get it for half price or less,’ ‘being forced to sacrifice what he or she cannot afford to lose,’ ‘while you satisfy your greed,’ ‘retain the property with honor,’ ‘trespassed on your neighbor’s right,’ ‘open injustice and violence will result.’*

**“In *Struggle for the Land*, Ward Churchill writes, ‘The U.S. entered into and ratified more than 370 separate treaties with peoples indigenous to the 48 states. The treaty relationships were reciprocal in nature. Indians ceded certain portions of their lands to the U.S., and the U.S. incurred specific obligations in exchange. The U.S. defaulted on its responsibilities under every single treaty obligation it ever incurred with regard to Indians. There’s even a Supreme Court opinion —the 1903 *Lonewolf Case* —in which the good justices held that the U.S. enjoyed a right to disregard any treaty obligation to Indians it found inconvenient, but the remaining treaty provisions continue to be binding upon the Indians. The court felt itself free to unilaterally interpret each treaty as being a bill of sale rather than a rental agreement.’ Ward Churchill, *Struggles for the Land* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993)**

**“In Minnesota in July 1862, ‘several thousand Santees assembled at the Upper Agency on the Yellow Medicine River to collect their annuities, which were pledged by the treaties, so that they might exchange them for food. The money did not arrive. Trader Andrew Myrich declared, ‘If they are hungry, let them eat grass!’ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. (New York: First Washington Square Press, 1981) The ensuing weeks saw bloodshed between hungry Indians and hardened whites.**

**“Regarding corporate covetousness of profits, “U.S. corporate law holds that management of publicly held companies must act primarily out of economic interests of shareholders. So, managers are legally obliged to ignore community welfare if those needs interfere with profitability. Though corporations enjoy many ‘human’**

rights, they have not been required to abide by human responsibilities." Jerry Mander, **In the Absence of the Sacred** (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991)

**How the respondent saw Commandments #9 & 10 reflected in Commandment #1**

"One of the ramifications of Americans' collective expropriation of indigenous people's lands is a curious tenacity to the doctrine of "private property rights." We worship private property like an idol all too often. The same can be said for the profit motive. Luther says 'this is the most common idol on earth.' We should instead 'trust in God alone.'

"If we truly observed the First Commandment and did not allow land possessions or profits to dominate our consciousness, then there might be more of a willingness of our society to recognize and then rectify treaty rights with indigenous peoples and to change corporate law towards a more sustainable future, thus complying with the Tenth Commandment as well."

# **NINTH & TENTH COMMANDMENTS**

***"You are not to covet your neighbor's house."***

***"You are not to covet his wife, male or female servants,  
cattle, or whatever else is his."***

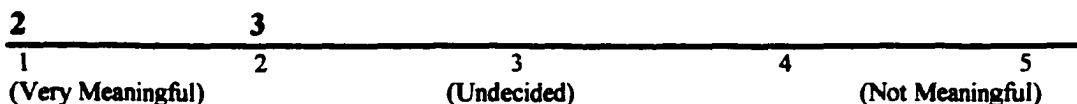
## **SURVEY RESPONSES**

**Total responses for this commandment: 5**

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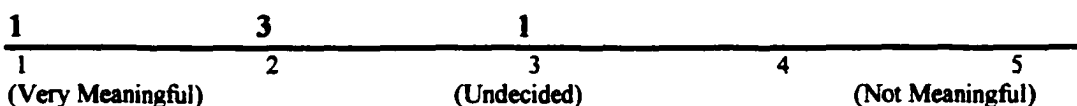
- 1) How meaningful was it for you to reflect on your commandment using Luther's *Large Catechism*?**

**No. of respondents:**



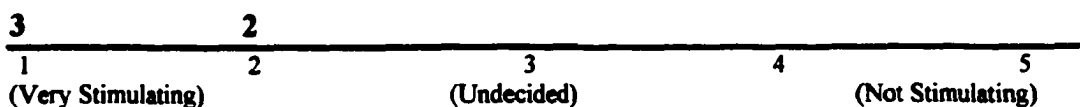
- 2.) Was it meaningful for you to reflect on the connection between your commandment and the First Commandment?**

**No. of respondents:**



- 3.) Did the *Large Catechism* serve as a springboard into deeper reflection on your selected commandment? Did it stimulate your thinking or praying about the commandment in ways you did not expect?**

**No. of respondents:**



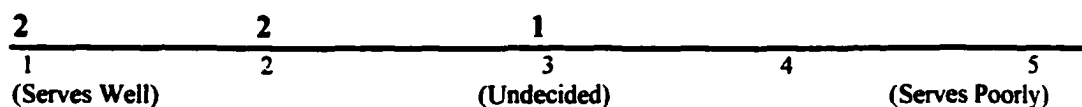


**NINTH & TENTH COMMANDMENTS  
SURVEY RESPONSES (CONT'D)**

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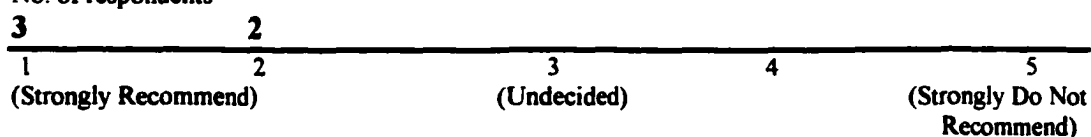
- 4) How well does the *Large Catechism* serve as a resource for spiritual reading where the intent is not just fact-finding but formation?

No. of respondents:



- 5) Would you recommend the development of an updated, user-friendly guide using the *Large Catechism* as a resource for meditation/prayer on the Ten Commandments?

No. of respondents:



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